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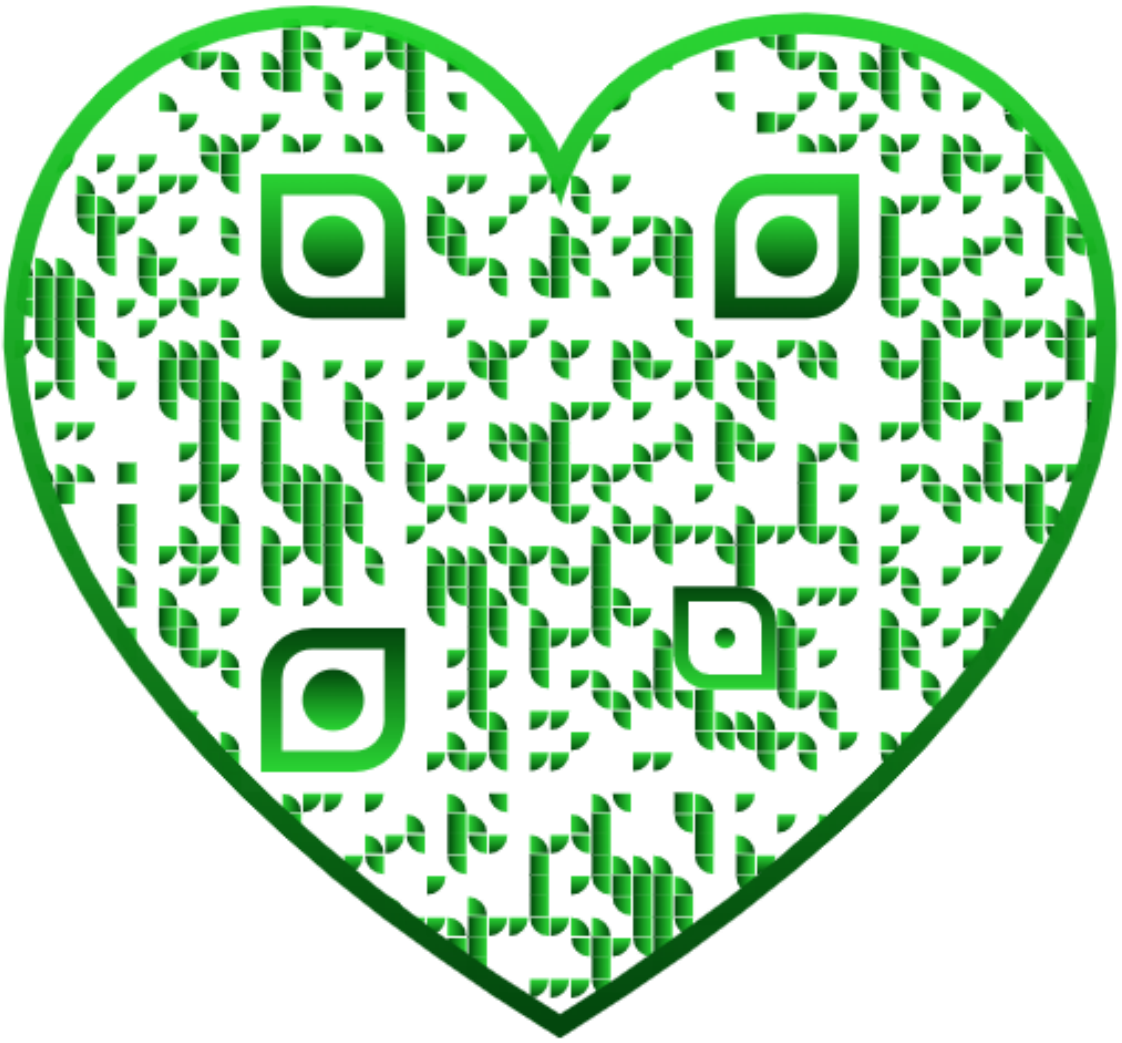
RollingStone

INDIA

AP DHILLON

On success, fame, representation, and being himself



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By Nidhi Gupta

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By David Britto

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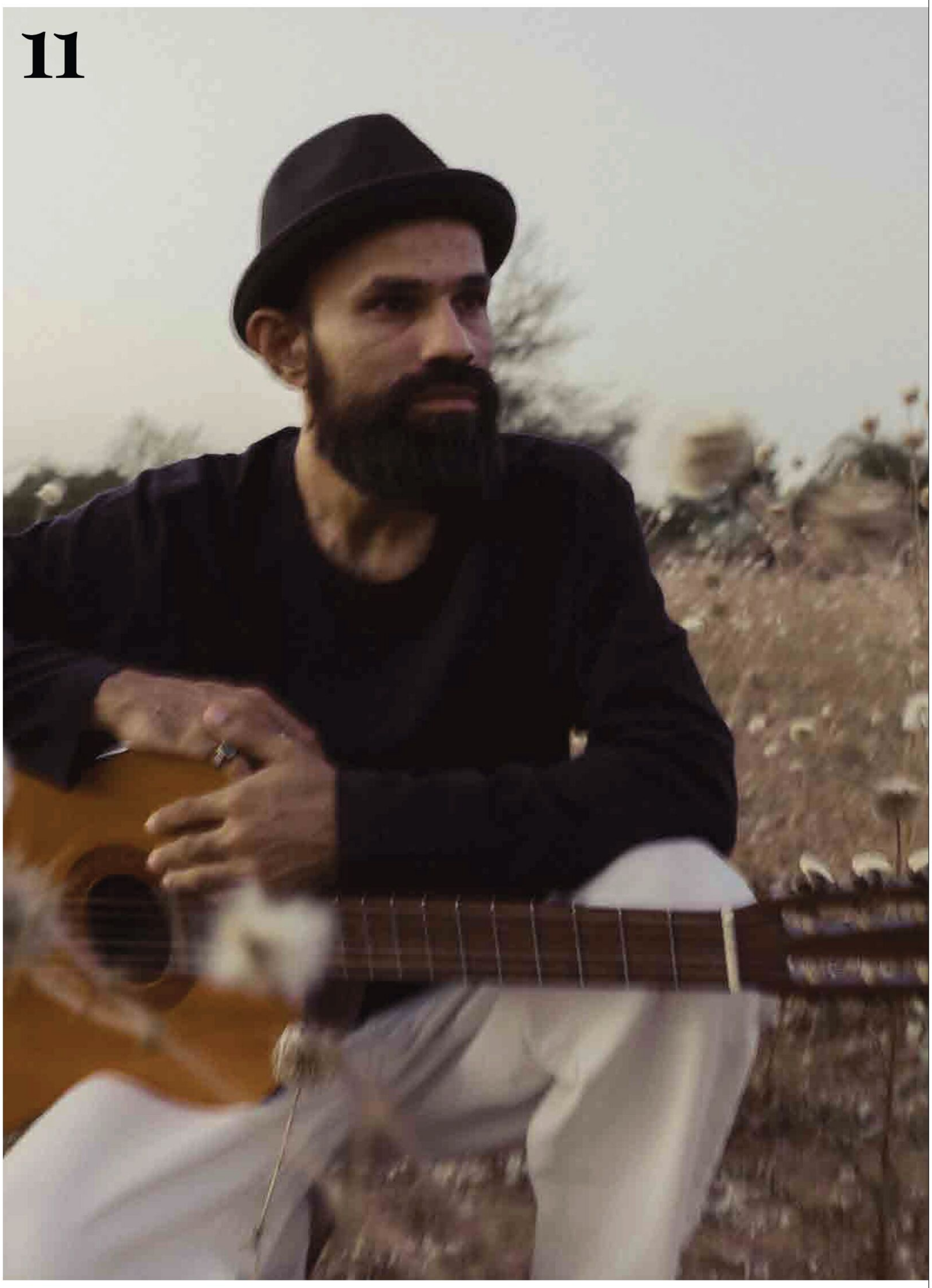

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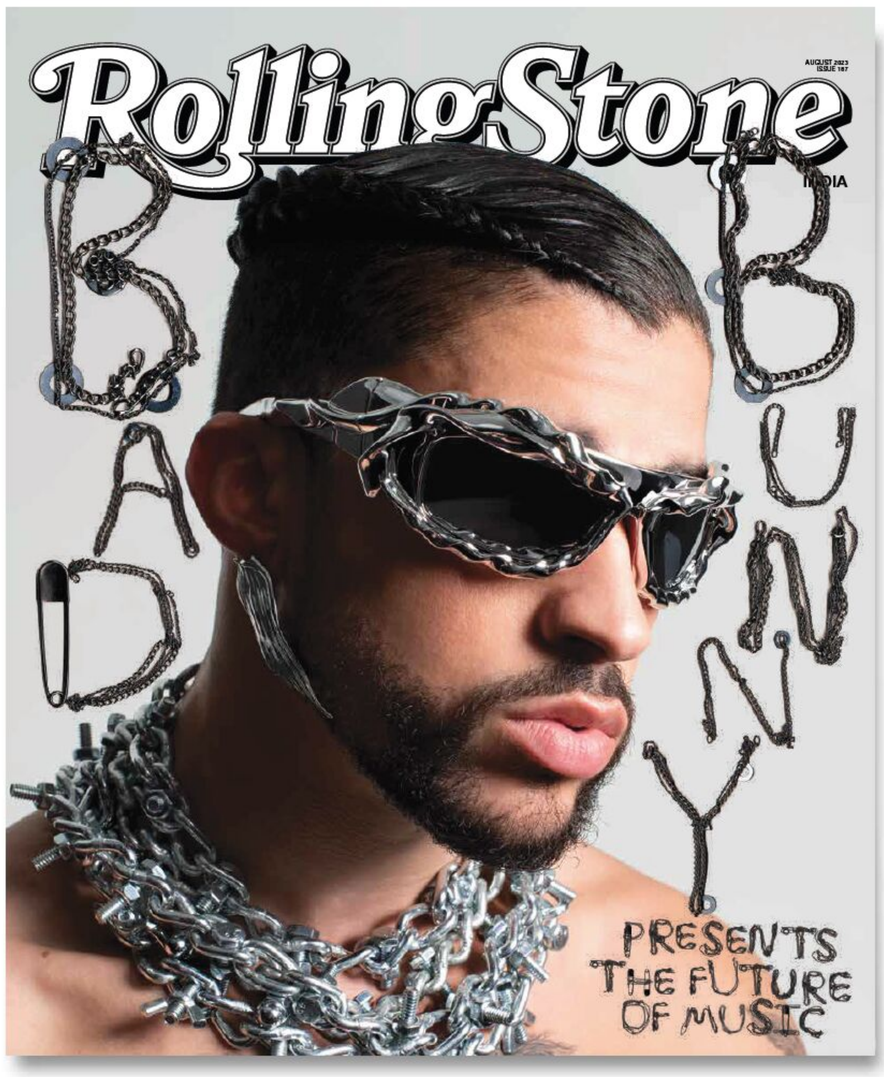
+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE



"[Bad Bunny] continues pushing boundaries and addressing pressing issues through his music, fostering meaningful change."

— Jeremy D'Costa

Bad Bunny's Lift-Off

The rise of Bad Bunny has been nothing short of phenomenal, inspiring a global wave of enthusiasm. However, as the artist conquers the world, it's essential to ponder what's next. Let's hope he continues pushing boundaries and addressing pressing issues through his music, fostering meaningful change.

SPOTLIGHT

Peekay's Stunning Visuals

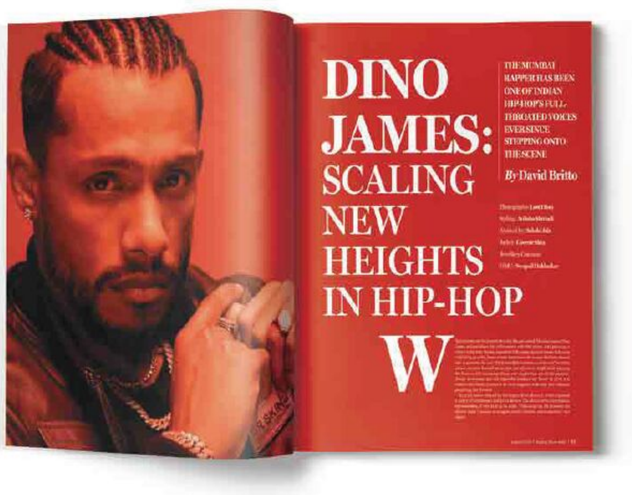
Peekay shines in an extraordinary video for "No Ordinary" from her 'Starlight' album. Its innovative visuals and captivating storytelling demonstrate the power of music in conveying emotions. Kudos to the artists and her creative vision, reminding us of the transformative potential of music videos.

- Priyanka Nair

Dhruv Visvanath's Cultural Diversity

Dhruv Visvanath's "Gimme Love" is a testament to his unique fusion and his music transcends boundaries, showcasing the beauty of cultural diversity. The interview sheds light on his artistic journey, leaving us eager for more musical collaborations that bridge genres and cultures.

- Suraj Uddupa



Dino James Inspires

The story on Dino James is a powerful portrayal of an artist who fearlessly tackles societal issues through music. His lyrical prowess and candid storytelling inspire both the youth and seasoned music lovers. His work resonates deeply, fostering conversations that matter.

- Srijit Menon

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Rina Seizes the Moment at Glastonbury

RINA SAWAYAMA *made headlines this year at Glastonbury with an emphatic speech against music-biz racism and sexism, seemingly directed at label-mate Matty Healy — but before she took the stage at the U.K. festival, she was thinking about how excited she was to bring the high drama of her Hold the Girl set to the country where she grew up. "It was an incredibly emotional weekend," says the singer, 33, who popped up again to sing "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" with her friend Elton John when he headlined the next day. "After the show, I literally came offstage sobbing, it was such an amazing, cathartic experience."*

Sawayama backstage before her Glastonbury performance in June

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

A Star Finally Finds Her Voice

Eve Hewson plays a woman who sings to escape in the movie musical 'Flora and Son'

PHOTOGRAPH BY Yé Fan

EVE HEWSON

Eve Hewson will not be doing karaoke today. "I have to be really, really hammered to do karaoke," the actress explains, walking through New York's Central Park. "I would really have to be a whole bottle of tequila deep." Not that she is opposed to such things ("I mean, I *am* Irish"), but it's 10 a.m. on a Wednesday, and up until very, very recently, sober public singing — or sober singing of any kind, really — was a complete nonstarter. "Absolutely not," she says. "Hard no. It was absolutely my biggest fear."

So she'd played a non-singing nurse in *The Knick,* a non-singing prostitute in *The Luminaries,* and a non-singing murderer in *Bad Sisters.* Then she'd taken a sleeping pill on a flight to London, read the script to *Flora and Son* — about a struggling single mom who finds a guitar and a way to forge a relationship with her teenage son — found it to be a "slam dunk," and decided not to "shit my pants," as she usually does at the thought of playing a chanteuse, but instead to call her agent and make a case for why John Carney, the writer-director of *Once,* should give her the main role: "I said, 'I can give you something that sounds like a real person trying to express themselves, rather than someone who is trained or has a natural gift.' I think it was the sleeping pill. I was kind of like, 'I'm just gonna have to put my big-girl panties on and learn how to fucking sing.'"

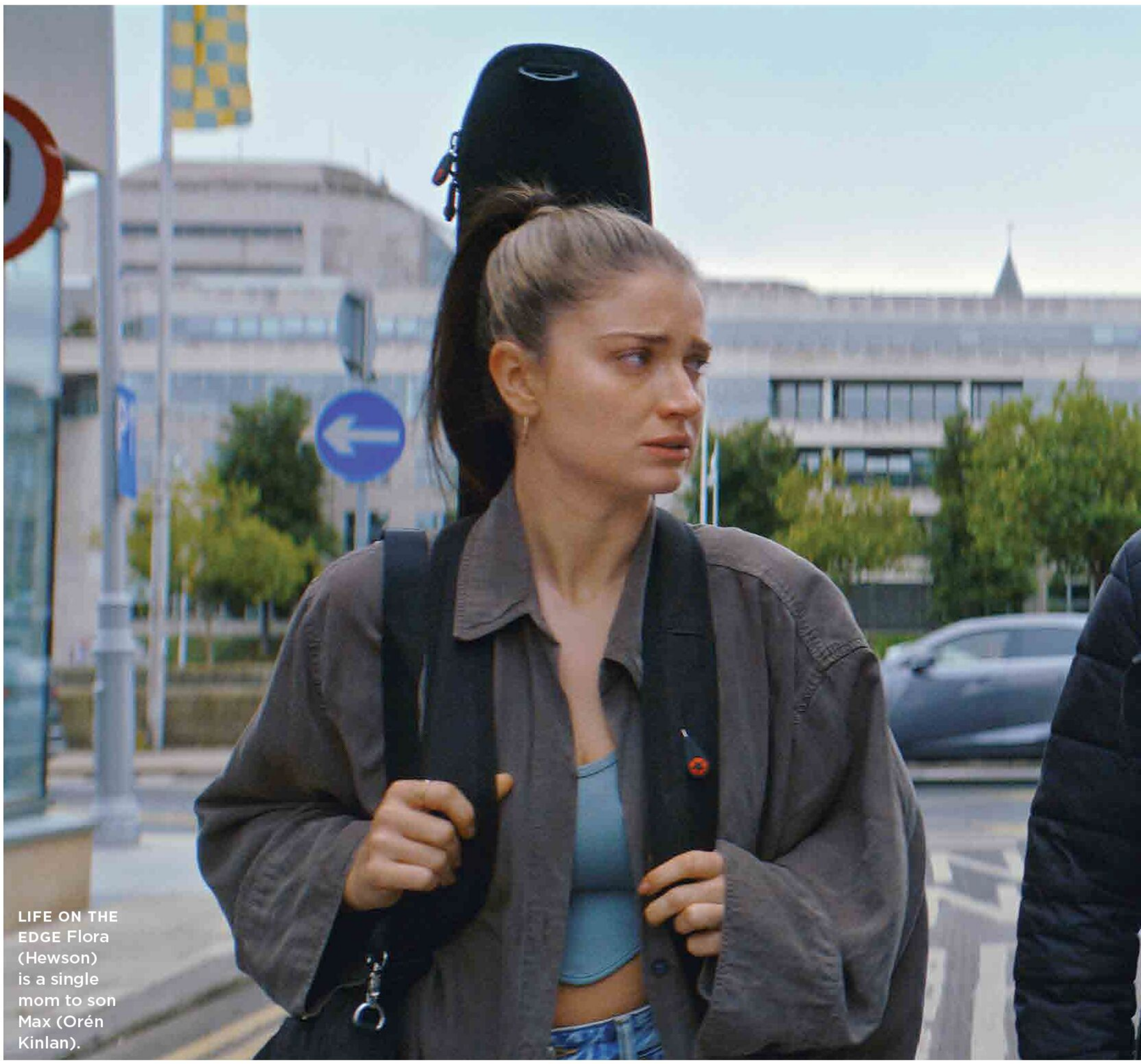
Which she did, flying to L.A. and spending the next few months in musical boot camp, not with her dad — who just so happens to be Paul Hewson, a.k.a. Bono — but rather with Eric Vetro. "He does Ariana Grande, Scarlett Johansson, and everyone who sings in a movie," Hewson tells me. "He basically became my therapist." She also brushed up on guitar, courtesy of Yousician. Then she reached out to Carney to ask for the film's songs so that she could start practicing them, only to learn that ... there weren't any songs to practice — yet. "I'm like, 'What the fuck? We're supposed to be shooting next week!' And he's like, 'Yeah, yeah, no, we're gonna go to the studio this weekend, and you and I are going to try and come up with something.'"

By this point in the conversation, Hewson and I have found our way over to the track around the Central Park reservoir, which is exactly where she was first seen in a film. "I was sitting right here, with New York in the background," she says of her appearance in a short movie her tutor shot while the family was tagging along with U2's tour, as they did each summer. "I didn't have any lines. I just sat there. But — I don't know — I felt just completely comfortable with the camera." Legend has it that the director of photography was so moved that he cried.

Hewson's parents, Bono and activist Ali Hewson, were less moved, and made it perfectly clear that a career in the arts wasn't recommended for any of their four children. There were the summers on tour, sure, seeing the world and glomming on to the rock-star lifestyle. But the rest of the year was explicitly designed to be a counterpoint to that for the Hewson clan. They went to church on Sundays. She attended her local primary school. When it came to secondary school, Hewson schlepped it on public transport. "There would be the odd fucking teenage dickhead that would sing 'It's a Beautiful Day' at me on the train, and I'd just be like, 'Um, OK.' But Irish people have a really good sense of humor. We take the piss out of each other every five seconds."

Growing up, Hewson, 32, ran with a "big motley crew" who were often the children of friends her parents met in middle school, before U2 was even the foggiest idea. "There wasn't much going on," she says of their sleepy Dublin suburb. "So we reenacted the Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams music videos. We'd put a coin in a bowl of flour and try and get it out with our hands behind our back." On Wednesdays, Hewson would get together with a local theater troupe and perform Monty Python scenes. There was a period when "the most fun thing to do" was rent a bunch of movies, watch them on repeat, and then prank call people. Sometimes they would pull numbers from her dad's contact list. Sometimes they would prank call Justin Timberlake.

At 15, Hewson's tutor cast her in a feature film. "And that was the kicker," she says. "That was the moment I was committed." She spent a summer studying at the New York Film Academy. She got accepted into the prestigious Tisch acting program at NYU. She moved to New York and "would walk up Sixth Avenue in my all-black attire, smoking cigarettes and chugging coffee, reciting my monologues in my head, feeling like a true thespian." When her parents voiced concerns, she pushed back on the pushback. "My dad's dad told him not to sing, so I kind of threw that back in his face," she says.



LIFE ON THE EDGE Flora (Hewson) is a single mom to son Max (Orén Kinlan).

FAST FACTS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Hewson is named after her time and date of birth: 7 a.m. on July 7 ("Eve is in seven").

BUT THERE'S MORE ...
Though she goes by Eve, her birth name is a bit longer: Memphis Eve Sunny Day Iris Hewson.

GOODBYE TO A GREAT
Hewson starred as the daughter of James Gandolfini's character in one of his final films, 2013's *Enough Said.*

LET'S DUET
At her 21st-birthday party in Las Vegas, parents Bono and Ali serenaded Hewson with Lady Gaga's "Telephone."

PREVIOUS PAGE: HAIR BY ANTHONY CAMPBELL AT A-FRAME. MAKEUP BY BRIGITTE REISS-ANDERSEN AT A-FRAME. STYLING BY KATE YOUNG AT THE WALL GROUP. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY SEAN NGUYEN. DRESS AND CARDIGAN BY DRIES VAN NOTEN. EARRINGS BY BOTTEGA VENETA. THIS PAGE: APPLE TV+

Then again, there have been times when being who she is, both physically and metaphysically, has been a bit of a mindfuck in an industry known for fucking with minds. "I have grown up with people having an idea of who I am before I've even met them," she says. "Way before I walk into the room, people have decided whether they like me or they don't, and that's a strong thing to consistently have growing up. And it's also hard to talk about because then people are like, 'Oh, she's complaining about her privilege.'"

Which, to be clear, she isn't. She's just trying to explain that, maybe more than the average person, she's had to question every single time whether an offer was "real" or only being offered "because, you know, they wanted the headline of Bono's daughter being in it," she says, dropping her voice low when she says "Bono's daughter." When she auditioned for *The Knick,* the casting director submitted just her first name ("like I was Madonna or something"). She doesn't know who told director Steven Soderbergh whose kid she was. "But I think when he found out, he was like, 'OK, I have to meet her,' because obviously he thought I would be some head wreck," she says wryly. "We have bad PR as a collective nepo-baby group. We need a new PR team. It's hard out there for the nepo babies."

It's probably a testament to her solidity — and her Irish penchant for taking the piss — that when *New York* magazine published its nepo-baby cover story last year, Hewson dove headlong into the fray. "Actually pretty devastated i'm not featured in the nepo baby article like haven't they seen my hit show Bad Sisters??? The NERVE," she tweeted, after having commented on the article with one single word: "jealous." She was surprised by the overwhelming response to what she had thought was her obviously underwhelming one. "I tweet stupid shit all day long. No one's paid attention," she tells me. "And then all of a sudden it became this huge debate and people were chiming in all these different opinions, and, oh, my God, it was just madness. But it was great promotion for *Bad Sisters*. I mean, the internet is a dark place, but you gotta use these things to your advantage."

Certainly, Hewson is not entitled enough to be confused as to why there should be hubbub around her entitlement. She was in the car with her dad and Bobby Shriver when they came up with the idea for Red. She traveled to Cork to meet the orphans arriving from Belarus as part of her mom's work with the Chernobyl Children's Project. When it came to *Flora,* she knew that there would be those who would question her right to play such a hardscrabble character. "Three days before we started shooting, I almost quit," she tells me. "I was sick with anxiety about it. The conversation that's happening right now about privilege? I understand where it's coming from. I take it seriously."

Hewson explains that despite her privilege, she's endured her fair share of harrowing Hollywood experiences, including a #MeToo episode that caused her to almost quit acting. "Honestly, if I get into it, then I have to call my therapist," she says, declining to name the film. Afterward, she found herself having panic attacks before auditions, and wondering if her body was sabotaging her acting career as a form of self-preservation. A year later, the #MeToo movement happened, bringing with it more interesting roles for women, including Hewson's in *The Luminaries* — "it was similar to what I was going through in my head because she was sort of the object of everyone's desire, and she felt trapped" — and a sense of empowerment that helped her fall in love with acting again. "All of a sudden, people were listening to women. They had access to the media, and social media, and they were able to say, 'This has been my experience. You have to listen to me now.' And that has changed everything on any set. If I have an issue, they better fucking take me seriously. They have to."

If there were any remaining questions about whether Hewson should be taken seriously on her own merits (and there likely weren't), they were put to rest with *Flora,* when the premiere at Sundance received a standing ovation. For her own part, Hewson has come to terms with the fact that her privilege helped jump-start her career, but that it could not possibly be all that has sustained it. "I asked myself a lot of questions, but what I came down to was that I am an actor," she says. "We are playing characters that are unlike ourselves. The actual craft of it is to not know anything about this person's life or their context or their background, and to find a way in to find empathy to then create a true authentic version of that person. I have played prostitutes before. I have played murderers. I have played a man living inside of a woman's body. I've been able to astral project myself and other human beings, you know? I have to just remember what I do."

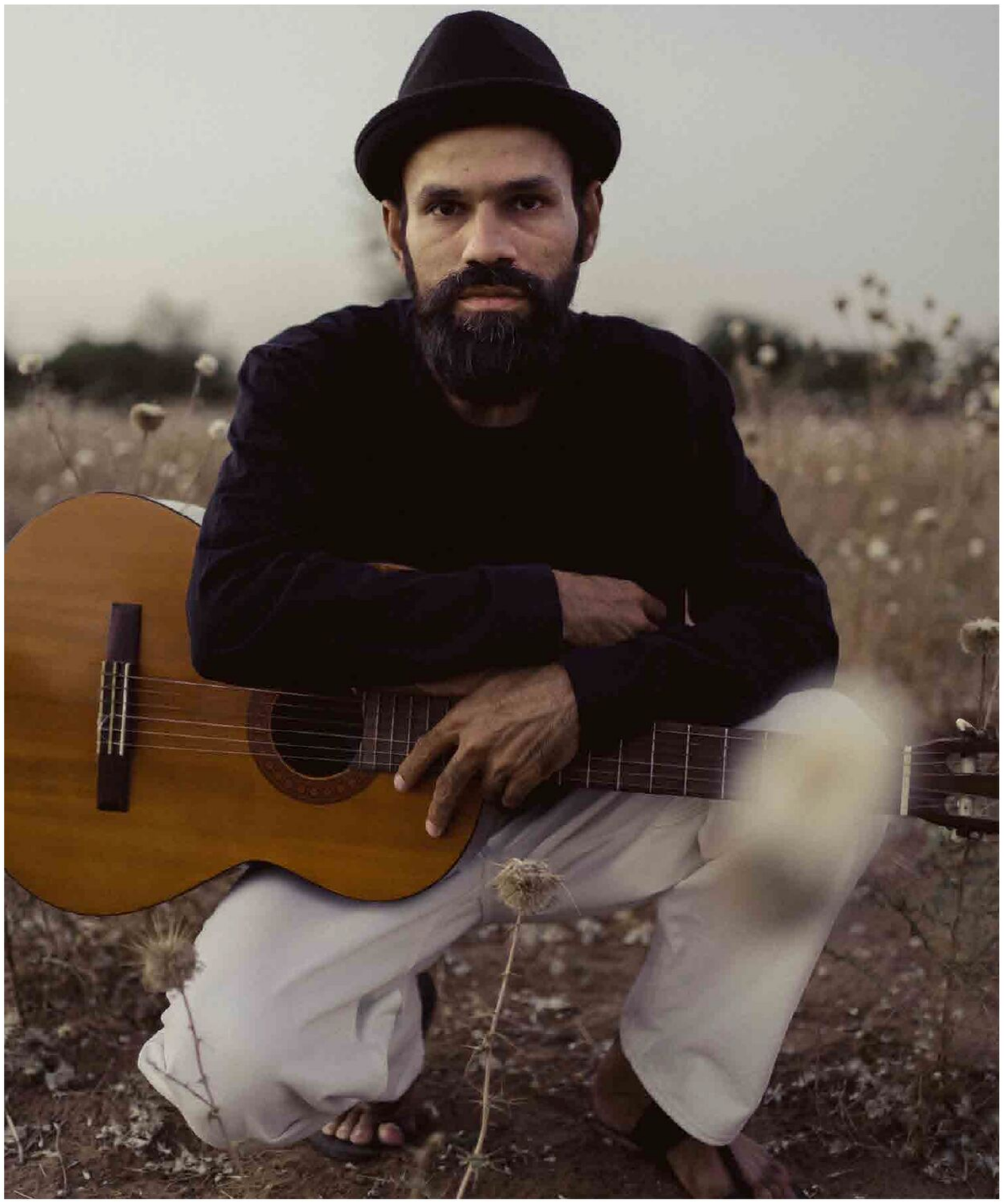
Plus, it turned out that in some ways, there couldn't have been a better fit for *Flora* than Hewson. The movie's best song is one that she helped write — a skill for which she is more than happy to credit her lineage. "I grew up songwriting," she says, explaining how her dad sometimes had her cut words from a newspaper and use them to create lyrics, Mad Libs-style. "I mean, we were so involved in his work every day. There was music being played, and, 'What do you think of this song? Do you like this verse?' Like, my dad didn't teach me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to write a song." The one she sings with co-star Joseph Gordon-Levitt was written in a Dublin studio in just eight hours and recorded that very night.

Now, with *Flora* set to be released by Apple TV+ in September, Hewson has just returned from Cape Cod, where she'd been working on Netflix's murder-mystery series *The Perfect Couple* until production was shut down by WGA picketers ("I mean, look, I get what they're doing"). Next, she'll head to the U.K. to film *Hedda,* based on Ibsen's play. Immediately after that, she'll film Season Two of *Bad Sisters*. Her schedule is so packed and peripatetic that, she tells me, while she'd love a boyfriend, the prospect feels logistically impossible. "I did start a Hinge account," says Hewson. "The first person that I got matched with is an 85-year-old man. His name was Malcolm. He worked in radio. And he was just looking for an attractive, young, slimmer lady to go on adventures with" — she makes air quotes — "'when safe, of course.'"

Speaking of safety, a couple of bikers ride past, and Hewson cocks her head to one side. "You know, I still don't know how to ride a bike," she admits. Then she sees the plotting look on my face and bursts out laughing: "No fucking way." ALEX MORRIS

Maddy Sharma Releases Poignant New Singles 'Door' And 'Kya Rahoge Tum'

The tracks are part of the Rajasthan-bred artist's plan to release one new song every month for the next few months



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

FRESH OFF RELEASING two new singles, the melancholic and breezy tracks "Door" and "Kya Rahoge Tum," Rajasthan-bred singer-songwriter Maddy Sharma talks to us about the new songs, his previous releases, what he's got in store next and more. Read below.

Tell me about your early years with music.
During my early years, I had the privilege of growing up in a small town in Rajasthan, where my passion for music began to take root. It was during this time that I discovered my fascination for playing the keys, and I eagerly delved into learning this instrument from a young age. My initial foray into the world of music performance occurred when I had the opportunity to showcase my skills during school prayers, which further fueled my passion and desire to pursue music seriously.

As fate would have it, I eventually made the decision to move to Ahmedabad to pursue my higher education. It was here that I truly started immersing myself in the music scene. Through persistent dedication and hard work, I began securing gigs not only within the city but also in surrounding areas.

Inspiration played a significant role in shaping my musical journey. I draw inspiration from a diverse range of artists, such as the legendary Kishore Kumar, the immensely talented Amit Trivedi, the maestro A.R. Rahman, the mesmerizing sounds of Coldplay, and the incomparable Michael Jackson. Each of these artists has left an indelible mark on my musical sensibilities and has influenced my approach to music. I'm incredibly grateful to my parents for their constant support in my pursuit of music.

What can you tell me about your previous releases?
I have released several tracks throughout my musical journey, showcasing my skills as a singer, composer, and lyricist. Some notable releases include 'Manzelien' in 2015 with Guru Dhanoa, 'Anjane Raatein' in 2019 with Divyang Arora, 'Aaj Mujhe Rona Hai' in 2019 with Ronak Pandit, and 'Coffee' in 2022 with Daidipya Sheth. These songs reflect different emotions and themes, resonating with listeners and inspiring me to continue creating meaningful music.

When can you tell me about "Door"?
The process of shaping my new song 'Door' began when I came up with the catchy hook line and shared it on my Instagram stories. The enthusiastic response from my friends and audience motivated me to develop the song further. I approached my collaborator, Daidipya, and we decided to keep the composition simple yet impactful. Surprisingly, what started as a spontaneous project evolved into an immersive creative process. We found ourselves completely absorbed in the songwriting, and within just an hour, the initial version of the song came together seamlessly.

In terms of its lyrical theme and sonic imprint, 'Door' represents a departure from my previous work, showcasing my versatility as an artist. The lyrics delve into themes of longing, closure, and the emotional journey of moving on. Musically, the song incorporates a unique blend of melodies and harmonies, creating a sonic experience that resonates with listeners. Overall, "Door" is a result of spontaneous inspiration, collaborative effort, and a desire to create something beyond our expectations. It represents a new creative direction for me as an artist, both in terms of its lyrical depth and its distinct sonic qualities.

What's next?
In the upcoming months, I have set my sights on a consistent release schedule, aiming to unveil one new song every month for the next four months. This collection of songs forms a cohesive series, where each track shares a common sonic thread while offering distinct and unique experiences. Similar to the surprise factor found in "Door," these upcoming releases will captivate listeners with unexpected twists and diverse musical experiments. I am eagerly anticipating the opportunity to present this carefully curated series, which not only showcases my artistic evolution but also demonstrates my versatility as a musician. DAVID BRITTO

MC Square Talks Fame After 'Hustle' and New Song "Laado"

The rapper gets flirty, folksy and draws from ghazals for his latest single

HIP-HOP ARTIST MC Square aka Abhishek Baisla draws from Indian traditional music forms and puts them in a rap context on his latest song "Laado," produced by Hiten.

The Haryana-raised artist says the music came about when he was at a session with Hiten and heard a beat that was sampling Indian classical vocals. "There was a *raag* playing and he was looping and sampling that. I was sitting there and thinking this could sound interesting with a folk aspect," MC Square says. With his towering and resolute vocal delivery, the rapper says he was thinking about an "old song from yesteryears. "We were all vibing with it so much. We knew it was going to blow up," he adds. From an influence perspective, the artist says he was experimenting with four different elements – a "folkish melody" derived from raags, "flirty rap," "lo-fi kind of singing" and ghazal.

> *"Where I've reached today as MC Square Lambardar, I owe it to the person I was on that show."*

"Laado" becomes a style-switching new release out via Sony Music India, one that follows songs like "Ram Ram," "Aadha Gyaan," "Bhoj" and "Chhore NCR Aale" (with Paradox) which were showcased on reality show *MTV Hustle 2.0*. Although the show churned a few new rising stars in desi hip-hop, MC Square clinched the title of winner of season two of *MTV Hustle*, which he describes as a "very beautiful" experience spanning three to four months.

He says about his time on the show, "All of us contestants shared a lot of culture, got to learn a lot of things as well from everyone. Where I've reached today as MC Square Lambardar, I owe it to the person I was on that show. I got to learn from people from all over, and connect with different cultures, like UNB in the North East. He's in *India's Got Talent* right now, so please support him."

MC Square points to artists like Gravity and Srushti Tawade being from Maharashtra which made him learn more about the culture of the state, while Uttar Pradesh was repped by the likes of Panther. Now out in the larger music industry with features in Bollywood songs like "Sher" from *Selfiee*, MC Square says he's still in touch with his peers from the show.

With auditions for the next season of *MTV Hustle* already underway, the outgoing winner says his advice for anyone thinking of contesting is to "be real and stay real." He adds, "Real is the new cool. You'll get ahead on your own. Time and god look to that and when you're real, you're set. If you believe in your craft, then just keep at it."

For his own part, there's a lot more coming out this year. "2023 *ka aisa scene hai ki sab kuch aa raha hai* [2023 is such that everything's coming out]. The MC Square You Saw in Hustle 2.0 is nothing compared to what you'll see next. I'm about to be 100, 200 times more of an artist and put out all different kinds of music. You'll hear *ghazals*, *lohris*... everything. Brace yourselves," he adds.

ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Yashraj Mukhate: "I've Got a Fan Base That Likes More Than Just Memes"

The composer, singer and producer says his new song "Rasmalai" has "resonated deeply with viewers, connecting on an emotional level"

AFTER THREE YEARS of gaining a reputation as that meme-making music composer, singer and producer, Yashraj Mukhate plays to his strengths on his new song "Rasmalai," which is a lofty, catchy love letter to his favorite sweet dish.

The song also marks the launch of Mukhate's label YM Originals, even as Mukhate goes on to collaborate with the likes of pop veteran Lucky Ali and producer Mikey McCleary on the recent single "Muskurayega." In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Mukhate talks about the making of "Rasmalai" (the song, of course) and what's coming up next.

"Rasmalai [is] my all-time favorite dessert. I wanted to capture the feeling of having the Rasmalai in a song."

What has the reception for "Rasmalai" been like so far? What's a memorable thing you read/reaction you saw to it so far?
The experience has been surprisingly wonderful. Despite the platform's inclination towards quick content, the full-length song "Rasmalai" on my profile has resonated deeply with viewers, connecting on an emotional level. Many even shared their Rasmalai moments inspired by the song, flooding my mentions with heartwarming pictures. The unexpected and heartening response has truly been a joy.

The obvious question, of course, is why you chose to write about this particular topic? What was it like working with Alok [Ranjan Srivastava] on the lyrics?
I've always found food intriguing, especially Rasmalai, my all-time favorite dessert. I wanted to capture the feeling of having the Rasmalai in a song. This was my first new original release in three years, and I didn't want it to be like the usual songs about love or heartbreak. Alok liked the idea and his words added a special touch, making the song even better and more relatable for our listeners.

What is it like acting on that composing instinct on a topic like this and feeling fully sure that the humor (and even effectiveness of it) will land?
Actually, it wasn't too hard. Everyone loves Rasmalai, so making a track about it was quite natural. The tricky part was making sure the melody and production were calming, since you don't often hear words like "Rasmalai" in Hindi songs. The goal was to blend this unusual word smoothly into regular Hindi/Urdu lyrics.

"Rasmalai" also feels like a solo original song after a while. Can we expect more of these in the coming months?
Certainly! A number of them are already in the pipeline, with a majority set to be released under my label, YM Originals. I'm brimming with excitement for these upcoming tracks, as they each possess distinct genres and forms that set them apart from one another.

There's a sense that beyond the memes, you've definitely gotten the music industry (and fans) to take you seriously as a composer. Was that difficult at all?
Yes! In the beginning, it was tough because my fans expected meme songs from me. That's why it took me about three years to release an original song. I didn't want to surprise them with something totally different from what they liked. But now, after these three years, I've got a fan base that likes more than just memes – they understand and enjoy my other work too. It feels great to see this change and know that they connect with what I create.

You've had a few projects that are collaborations like with [hip-hop artist] QK. How do you decide on collaborations and what has it been like navigating that space?
I tend to jump on board with anything that catches my interest, whether it's a catchy tune or a funny line. My collaboration with QK happened because I really liked the melody she had created, and I couldn't resist producing the song for her. It turned out really great. I enjoy teaming up with artists who have something unique to offer like this. Working together not only boosts my creativity but also leads to awesome results.

What else is coming up through 2023?
I've got lots in store – more singles, exciting collaborations, and some surprises that I'll keep secret for now. Everything will be out by the middle of next year, and I'm really looking forward to it. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Sunflower Tape Machine Releases Acoustic-Leaning Ditty 'Rosemary'

The track is the Chennai musician's first of 2023

CHENNAI ARTIST Aryaman Singh aka Sunflower Tape Machine recently released his first piece of new music since 2022's "the end. // the beginning." The musician's latest offering is the acoustic indie folk song "Rosemary." In this interview with Rolling Stone India, Singh talks to us about what he's been up to this past year, the new track and future plans. Read below.

You mentioned you took a year-long hiatus, what were you up to during that time?

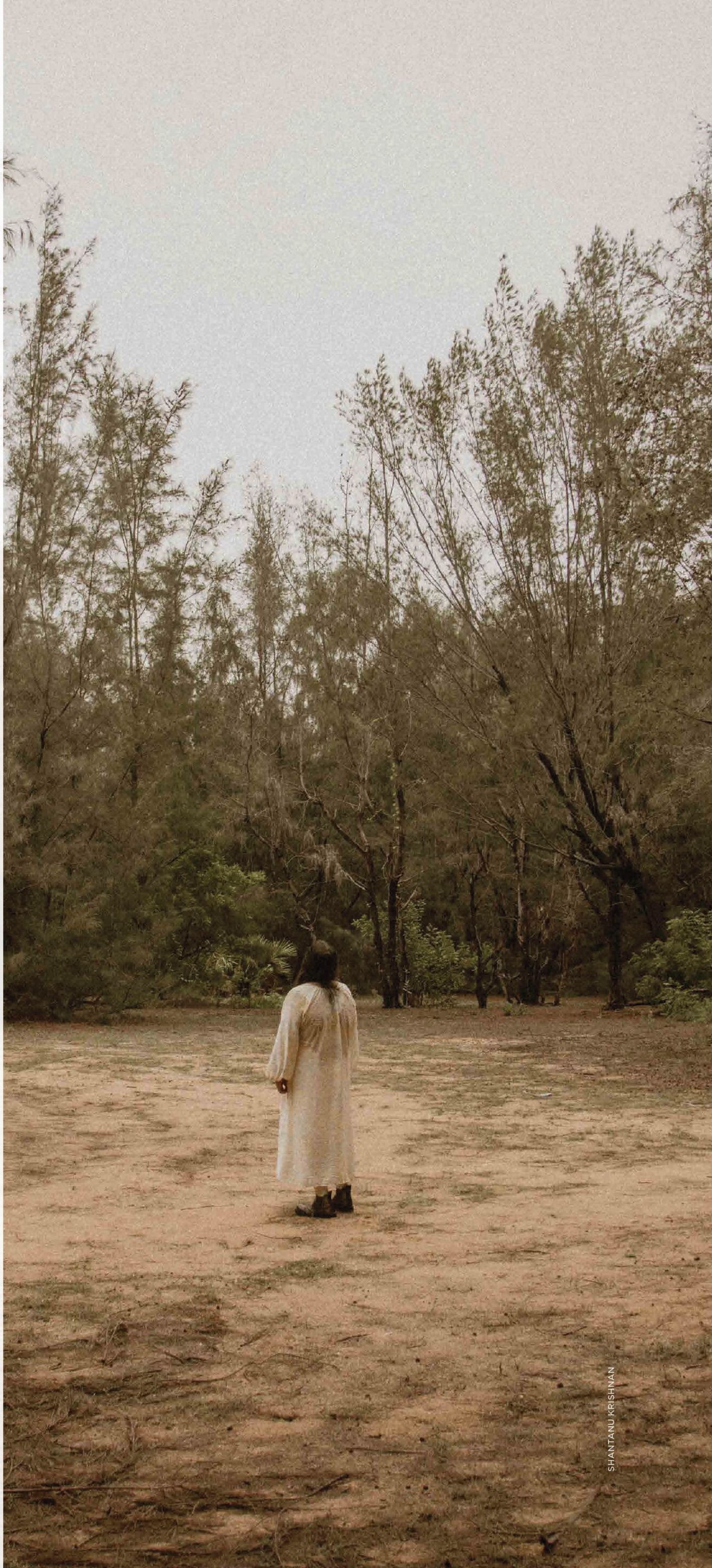
Deciding to take some time off to explore my art and work on a larger body of work was extremely difficult and took a toll on me as doing so would've made me lose the momentum I gained through 'Sophomore Sweetheart' (2021) and 'Internet Friends' (2022). The last year has been a rollercoaster, to say the least; I scrapped my Initially planned big release because it was no longer true to who I was as an artist, I had countless episodes of writer's block and, since I never went to university and music was all I did full time, the number of unproductive hours filled my mind with 'what if this doesn't work out' thoughts. This forced me to join a university to study film, but I dropped out one month later. It took me a while, but I finally realized it was okay to take some time off because it was the music that mattered the most. Ever since, I've been working on a larger body of work.

When did your song "Rosemary" begin to take shape and what can you tell me about it?

The writing process for 'Rosemary' was one of the most organic of anything I've written. It started with me stumbling across the chords, one night, when I was just laying in bed with my guitar. I was absolutely in love with the chords but I was forcing it down the alt-rock/indie-pop route that I usually go with. It wasn't until a few days later did I realize, slowing it down and playing it on the acoustic guitar, made it extremely intimate and bittersweet. That's when the track truly started taking shape. Immediately all that I could think of, were the last few lines of the song, 'And I wish I could see her, and I wish I could feel her, and I wish I could hold her," and every other word in the song just came to me, because it is about being in such a familiar position that almost everyone has been in. One of the biggest aspects of intimacy is familiarity and that is exactly what I've tried to capture with the sonics of 'Rosemary.' I've tried to make it the most intimate experience possible for the listener, rather than it being just another song. It merges traditional folk elements with my inclination for experimenting with vocals and how they are perceived.

What can you tell me about the larger body of work you are putting together?

Currently, the EP/album is taking more shape than ever. I've been working on finishing it, almost every day for the last few months and aim to release it by late 2023 or early 2024. DAVID BRITTO



SHANTANU KRISHNAN

American Artist Allen Ling Puts His Life's Love Stories Into a Trilogy of Songs

California-based Ling also teamed up with rap-rock band Flipsyde's Dave Lopez for production and guitar on songs like "Straight Into The Ocean" and "A Name In Your Book"

BETWEEN RUNNING a physical therapy business he owns, being the primary caregiver for his 90-year-old mother and maintaining a farm, you'd think Allen Ling wouldn't really have time and energy to become a rock artist too.

With the release of two songs and their film-like music videos – "Straight Into The Ocean" and "A Name In Your Book" – Ling picks back up on music after a long gap. The Chinese-origin, American artist based in California was singer and guitarist in a 13-piece band and apparently wrote over 200 songs sometime in the Eighties. They were "exhumed" in 2009, by which time Ling was also into comic books, publishing and executive producer for other artists like The Runaway Hearts.

While Ling counts the likes of Duran Duran, Pet Shop Boys and The Cure, there's also an unmistakable Nineties and early 2000s alt-rock flavor heard in the lush production aesthetic and guitars heard on "Straight Into The Ocean" and "A Name In Your Book." Released in June and July this year, the songs are part of a trilogy of tunes that are loosely inspired by Ling's own tryst with love and relationships.

He even brought in actor Aramis Knight (recently seen in *Ms. Marvel* as Kareem/Red Dagger) to play a character in the video for "Straight Into The Ocean," which details a story about heartbreak and extreme measures taken while grieving lost love. "I wrote that song straight out of heartbreak," Ling says over a video call from the U.S.

The video for "A Name In Your Book" opens with a performance of "A Straight Into The Ocean," where Ling is seen performing with regular collaborator and friend Dave Lopez (from rap-rock band Flipsyde) and unravels a love story that's a prequel to the plot of the first release. In an expected way, Ling invokes a reference to *Star Wars* and the franchise's storytelling chronology. Ling said in a statement about his choice of subject for songs, "I believe some of the best works of art and music are born from incredible suffering. I try not to seek out heartbreak as a source of inspiration, but it finds me."

After screening at film festivals around the world (including India), Ling felt it was time to give the videos a wider release via YouTube when he became "more removed from the emotional component" of the things he was addressing through the song and stories on screen. He's seen people call the storylines funny whereas he was actually going for tragic. Ling says, "What was interesting was that Gen Z... really young teenage girls saw the video and they felt, 'Oh my god. That is so sad.'"

The visual storytelling side to Ling also comes from running his own comic book publishing company, he says. "The ultimate artform, as you know, is film, with music, dialog and acting and visuals. It was only a natural evolution to keep pushing the envelope," Ling adds.

As for music, he found a friend in Flipsyde's Dave Lopez through a common friend in 2016. "He has an emotional way to play," Ling says of Lopez. The guitarist joins our call to talk about Ling and their process and how their songwriting often ends up leading to Ling visualizing what he has in mind for a music video. "Usually it starts with an acoustic guitar, me and Allen sitting down and strumming. We put it on a canvas and he takes it somewhere else," Lopez says.

They've worked on the third song called "Remember" to round out the trilogy, which Lopez calls "very emotional" and also likens to Flipsyde's first album. It's slated to release later this month. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Singer Bismil Is Taking Mehfils to New Places and Audiences

The artist, inspired by the likes of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Jaun Elia, speaks about a recent North American tour and what's next

FROM A BILLBOARD in Times Square in New York City to audiences in North America, vocalist Bismil has carved out a place for himself by modernizing traditional performances known as *mehfils*, where poetry, music and dance combine. At his *mehfils*, Bismil performs occasionally with a live band and also assumes his place on a chair, book in hand and reads out *shayaris* to audiences.

It seems like each element of Bismil's *mehfils* are to keep an audience engaged or at least satiated with some kind of entertainment, and all of this very much aligns with the core idea of the atmosphere that *mehfils* have been conducted in for centuries. Outside of the tours, Bismil has also been steadily building up his studio game, releasing his version of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's "Kali Kali Zulfon Ke Phande," plus a sort of mashup of "Tumhe Dillagi" and "Halka Halka Suroor." It helps that Bollywood soundtracks too have dipped back into qawwalis and ghazals over time, which Bismil often posts cover versions of, to his YouTube channel.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Bismil takes about taking his *mehfils* to India and North America, retaining the essence of such performance formats and what's next. Excerpts:

What has the journey been like to bring in younger, modern audiences for *mehfils*? Especially around the world now, not just in India?

Sufi as a genre of music has the power to bring people together and naturally, audiences of all age groups relate to the soulful lyrics and enjoy its calming energy... I firmly believe I'm the chosen one to have had the privilege to be the frontrunner in making *mehfils* more mainstream in India. On a personal level, I feel more accomplished when music lovers from different age groups come together and blend in the energy of soulful music. What's even more gratifying is that we have been able to do this not just in our country but across the globe as well.

In that sense, what was an important takeaway or experience you gained from your U.S. and Canada tour?

Performing in the U.S. and Canada was truly a dream come true. Each day of our trip and each performance was a surreal experience. And of course, there's been nothing more gratifying than watching my video being played at Times Square, a moment neither of us could have envisioned at the beginning of our journey.

"Sufi as a genre of music has the power to bring people together and naturally, audiences of all age groups relate to the soulful lyrics and enjoy its calming energy."

As an artist, we all dream of performing in the biggest countries across the globe and fortunately I had the privilege to make this dream a reality. One of my biggest takeaways from that trip and the journey till date has been to continue to believe in my art and my talent and alongside giving it my all. I strongly believe that as an artist if you are 100 percent faithful to your art and give it your all, you do reap the benefits of your hard work.

***Mehfils* also have such a long-running history and legacy to them, as a performance format. In that sense, what kind of change did you want to make to this, while retaining the essence?**

Indeed *mehfils* as a medium of performance have a very rich history and legacy attached to it. Now performing such an art form brings along some pressure since the challenge is to continue the legacy while also making it relevant for the new-age audience. We, as a team, took it as an opportunity to experiment and create a fusion wherein we amalgamate Western music with the traditional art form. Now that I reflect upon it, it's amusing to see how we made it possible. If you closely observe our performance you will realize how we have infused modern rhythming methods of music with traditional Sufi artforms. A more evident change is of course using both traditional and Western instruments to create the perfect musical blend.

Your *shayaris* on stage are usually about love, friendships and family, right? What is your writing inspiration and process like?

As an artist, I am deeply inspired by the legends of the industry like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Jaun Elia, Gulzaar Saah and many more. It is their legendary work that inclined me towards doing *shayaris* and poetry.

Furthermore, I believe *shayari* and poetry are the best medium to express a wide spectrum of emotions and experiences we have undergone in our personal lives. And as a natural course of life, we all experience a gamut of emotions in friendships, love and with family. Leveraging the extensive potential of this art form, we are able to offer a voice to our experiences which consequently becomes relatable for everyone.

You have released a few singles so far. How and when do you usually decide you have to record and release a song, even if it's a new version of an existing classic?

Being an artist, you happen to try your hands on different art forms from time to time. For me, I have always been keen on creating longer compositions while writing poetry or *shayari*. Fortunately, I've received a positive response for my work so far.

I'm so grateful that both of these covers ["Kali Kali Zulfon Ke Phande," "Tumhe Dillagi"] received tremendous love from people. I feel we should not look for that one perfect moment to do something new instead do what we want and make that moment perfect. Keeping this philosophy in mind, we are currently working on making fresh music that we intend to bring forth for the audience very soon. I'm really looking forward to this and I hope people will continue to give our music the same love and warmth they've showered on us till now.

What's coming up next through 2023?

2023 has been a phenomenal year for us so far. We have ticked off major goals and turned our dreams into reality. I'm so grateful to all my fans and supporters for taking us to great heights. The goal for the second half of the year is to continue this streak while also bringing forth some fresh work, some good music for our fans. We are consciously taking the decision to take a step back from shows and focus our energies into curating some soulful compositions for all the music lovers around. The team is working with full force on this goal and I can't wait for you all to listen to our new singles.

ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Boiler Room Mumbai Witnessed Scorching Performances from Manni Dee, FKA.m4a, Wallis and Hyperaktivist

Also on the lineup was DJ Uri, Watashi and Spryk for the day-long event

IN A WORLD where consumer engagement reigns supreme, Budweiser has emerged as a brand that truly understands the heartbeats of its audience. With music, pop culture, art, and sports as its guiding pillars, Budweiser has spent the last decade making waves. This journey has not only fortified the brand's standing but has also brought the global music universe to India, sparking electrifying moments in the process such as electronic music event Boiler Room.

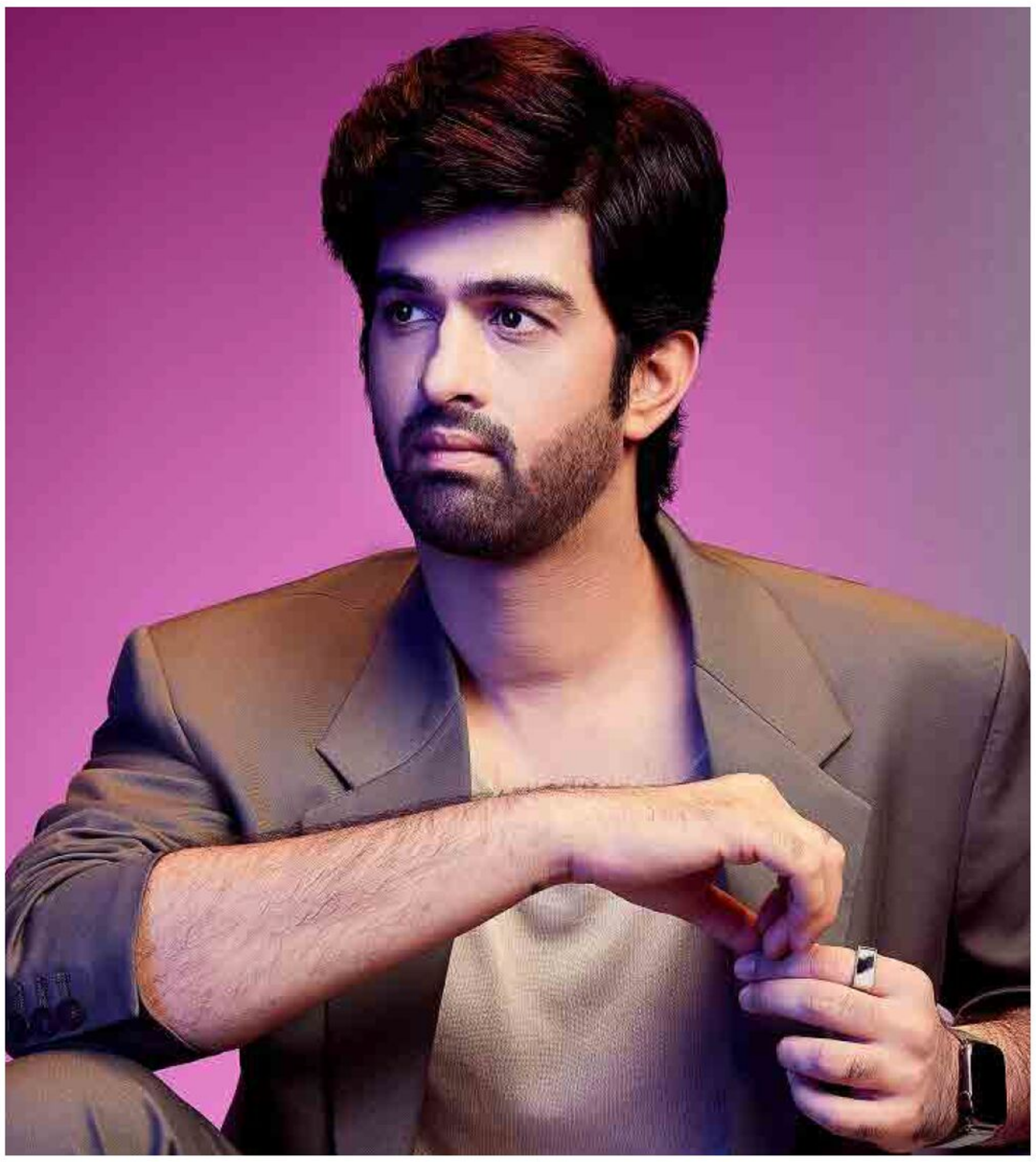
Electronic music fans gathered in numbers on August 19th, 2023, at Mumbai's NESCO: Exhibition Centre to participate in the experience of Boiler Room. In a world where electronic music culture has become a global phenomenon, Budweiser has played a central role in fueling its rise in India. Beyond just bringing global music properties to the country, the brand has committed to nurturing the electronic music culture in India. It does so by championing not only international sounds but also curating multiple homegrown music platforms. This dual approach ensures that local talent receives the recognition and platform it deserves.

This year Mumbai witnessed blazing performances from the likes of Manni Dee, FKA.m4a, Wallis, Hyperaktivist, DJ Uri, Watashi and Spryk. This fusion of global and local talent created performances that were nothing short of electric.

As Budweiser and Boiler Room continue their collaborative journey, the future is ablaze with promise. The brand's unwavering dedication to music, culture, and community engagement shines bright, lighting up the way for more remarkable experiences yet to come. DAVID BRITTO

Hriday Is at His Emotive Best in New Video For 'Saaya'

The track follows the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's 2022 EP 'Jukebox Of History'



A YEAR ON since releasing his five-track debut EP Jukebox Of History, Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Hriday is now back with a fresh new sound in the shape of his latest electro-pop track "Saaya."

The new song opens with the artist's honeyed vocals before groovy drum and bass parts enter the fray, laying the foundation for sleek production nuances to creep in and out during the track. Midway through "Saaya," there's also a smooth breakdown which allows for a tiny but effective bass solo too. What initially started off as just a piano riff has now turned into a synth-pop bop.

Hriday says, "'Saaya' is a song you can interpret as your own. No matter which point you're at in life, this piece of music has got your back. It has a lot in it that I kind of have learned and listened to during my life." He adds, "It's intense but it's also upbeat. It has a message yet it's not preachy. It came to me instinctively and felt like a bit of divine intervention. I had a blast producing this track as well. 'Saaya' is my letter of self-love to the world."

A music video – directed by Aakib Siddique – has also been released to accompany the song. In the clip, Hriday is seen full of emotion performing the track as the visual creatively explores the interplay of light and darkness, highlighting their essential roles in sustaining life. With "Saaya" now out of the way, Hriday doesn't have any plans of slowing down and is already prepping to release two more singles before the end of 2023. DAVID BRITTO

Artist/Painter Rannaika Chaudhuri: 'Art Exists Everywhere'

The Mumbai artist talks to us about her brand Rezurrct, her creative process and more

20-YEAR-OLD MUMBAI painter and artist Rannaika Chaudhuri was brought up in a household wherein her mother, a professional artist herself, would provide art classes for students. The young Chaudhuri would sit in on those classes from time to time. She says, "Although sometimes I would not paint but just watching all the different people learning different things from my mother was very inspiring and since a very young age, I knew that art was going to be a big part of my life and personality."

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Chaudhuri talks to us about her creative process, her company Rezurrct and her future plans. Read below.

What is your creative process like and how do you usually conceptualize a piece?

Art exists everywhere and you may have heard that a million times, but nothing is more true for my process where I can receive that initial inspiration from anyone and anything in life which then leads to the start of the piece. Small things everywhere, my mood, my feelings, the things around me and the place I am in life leads to the process of creation while building upon that first initial idea. This is not only from my personal thought process but also ideas I get from other people for their concepts and their pieces where the inspiration and what struck them, and what they want is the first step to then building upon it with my own personal artistic touch.

What can you tell me about Rezurrct?

Covid lockdown was a blessing in disguise as it gave me the time to sharpen my artistic skills. While the whole world was on a standstill and no one knew how to spend that time I would be painting 24/7 and eventually decided to capitalize on my talents by starting Rezurrct along with my older sister Robica Chaudhuri, and my mother Swagata Chaudhuri as the backbone. It has been a great starting point for my career and also has helped me evolve as an artist immensely.

"The fact that something that I made with my hands could bring someone happiness or meaning while coloring and beautifying their home is priceless to me."

What are some of the challenges you face being an artist?

Art block is common but that's where other people's ideas come in, Rezurrct allows me to get inspiration from people from all walks of life, how they function, what inspires them and in turn that allows me to further my artistic vision. It has given me an outlet to provide people with a method to bring their creativity to life while also giving me an outlet to sharpen my skills. thus creating a symbiotic relationship where everybody leaves having gained something. A few other hurdles that I have faced as an artist is being scammed, taken advantage of or getting underpaid for my work. I think these are some problems faced by most artists of any form, it's truly disheartening, but all you can do is keep your head high, know your worth and be aware.

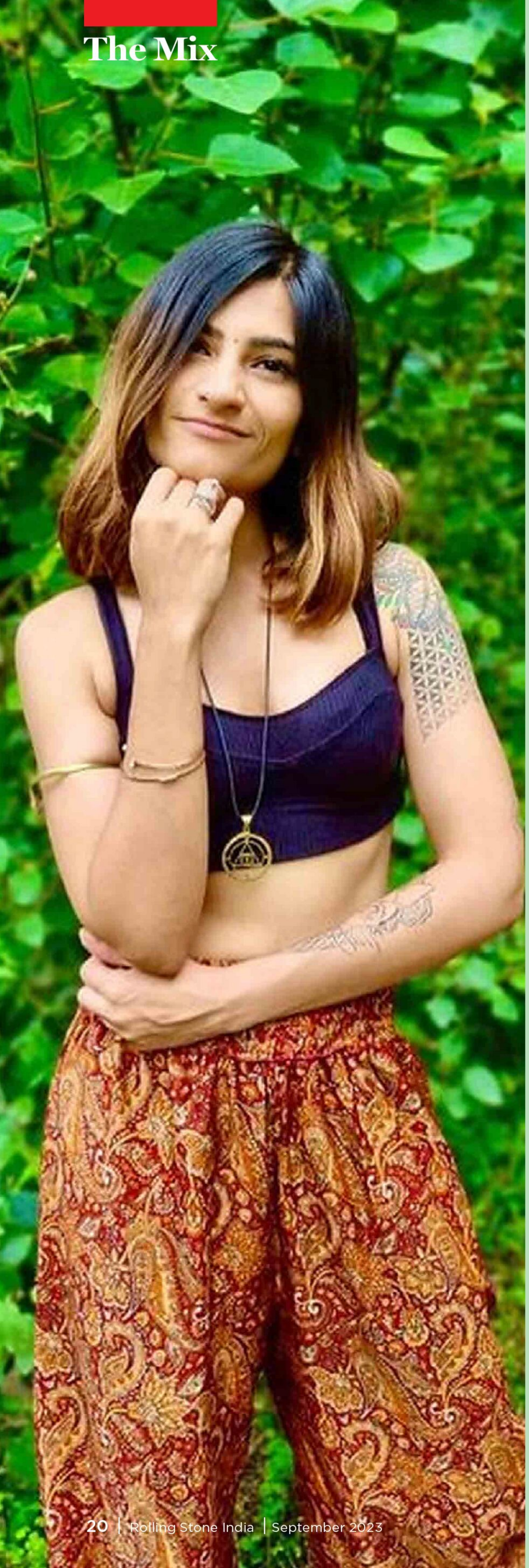
What's an accomplishment or milestone that stands out for you thus far?

Since I am just 20 and have recently started this endeavor in a professional manner there aren't that many milestones as such that I can mention but what I can say is each piece of artwork that I finish is an accomplishment in itself. The fact that something that I made with my hands could bring someone happiness or meaning while coloring and beautifying their home is priceless to me. So, to end it I do feel like every piece of art I have made is a real achievement and a milestone to me.

What are you currently working on and what plans do you have within the field going forward?

Currently, I am still studying Bachelor of Fine Art while working on the development and growth of my brand Rez. I am also working on some really exciting workshops and diverse projects to explore the field a bit more. At this point in my life, I would love to sharpen my skills further and focus on projects that have not been done before. Also furthering my brand by possibly adding concepts of digital art. Art has no right or wrong and no specific process to be followed, you just go with the flow and that is exactly how I plan on furthering my artistic career by going with the flow while keeping my ambition to level hundred and I know I will get there. I'm here to take over and be taken over by art. **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Vasvi Releases Blitzing Techno Debut EP 'Quantum Soup'

The two-track record has been released via Italian label Psy4Aliens

RECENTLY, Chandigarh-bred psychedelic/techno artist Pranavi Walia aka Vasvi released her thumping two-track debut EP entitled *Quantum Soup*, out via Italian label Psy4Aliens. Vasvi caught up with us to talk about how she discovered music, what led to her performing live, the tracks on the EP, future plans and more. Read below.

How did your interest in music begin?
Being born and raised in Chandigarh, I was a pretty studious kid. Music always had an important place in my heart, even when I started with metal and rock in school. I shifted to Delhi for my Undergraduate in Clinical Psychology, which opened up a lot of new music to me. I spent my days studying and nights discovering new music at different hot spots in the city. I have a ton of people to thank for shaping my music taste and pushing me into playing professionally.

When did you being performing and writing your own music?
The music scene in New Delhi had opened me up to so many sub-genres of music that I spent three to four years discovering new music, new styles, and new artists. I knew I had an affinity for music since school, but this exposure helped me bring it to the forefront. My first show was in the mountains in 2020 as my first moniker – Tangled Psyche (psychedelic) and within a year I started with my techno project Vasvi. I started taking interest in production the same year and released my first track in 2021.

What can you tell me about your previous releases?
I met some really great artists that introduced me to a whole new world of electronic music in 2015. After five years of an incredible journey between both techno and psychedelic trance, I decided to finish my Masters and pursue music as more than just a hobby. I started making music three years ago, dipping my toes into psychedelic music. I've released two songs on different compilations with Knobs and Keys Label and Studio 51/Adapt Academy. After these, I expanded my arsenal and started making techno, with *Quantum Soup* (EP) being my first release.

What can you tell me about the EP?
It's my desire to share my true self with my listeners. This EP is quite a turning point for me in my life. In this day and age, we're quite lucky that we get to experiment with different music genres and make something that really resonates with ourselves. *Quantum Soup* blends both styles that are close to my heart, marking many more possibilities in techno and its mix with psychedelic elements, paving a common ground for both genres. The EP is based on pulsating bass, driving kicks, and defined low-end frequencies with a mix of some glitchy sounds and even sounds taken from the forest. The rolling style and groove is quite a nice form of active mediation, with music connecting people beyond the barriers of language and even genres.

How did you strike the deal with Psy4Aliens for this release?
I had been in talks with GianCarlo since April. I planned on sending him a single release, but we decided to turn it into an EP for me to really introduce my sound properly to my listeners. Psy4aliens has been one of my dream labels, with releases from prominent artists such as Rupt and David Phoenix. It is also one of the labels that is open to such experimental and futuristic sounds.

What else is coming up next for you?
There's a new found burst of energy in me. I'm taking some downtime in Parvati to rejuvenate. I'm planning on releasing a few singles in techno that I've kept under wraps before I start work on my psychedelic project again. It's a bit of a struggle balancing two different projects, but I feel like I'm on the right track. I'll be releasing my second EP around September.

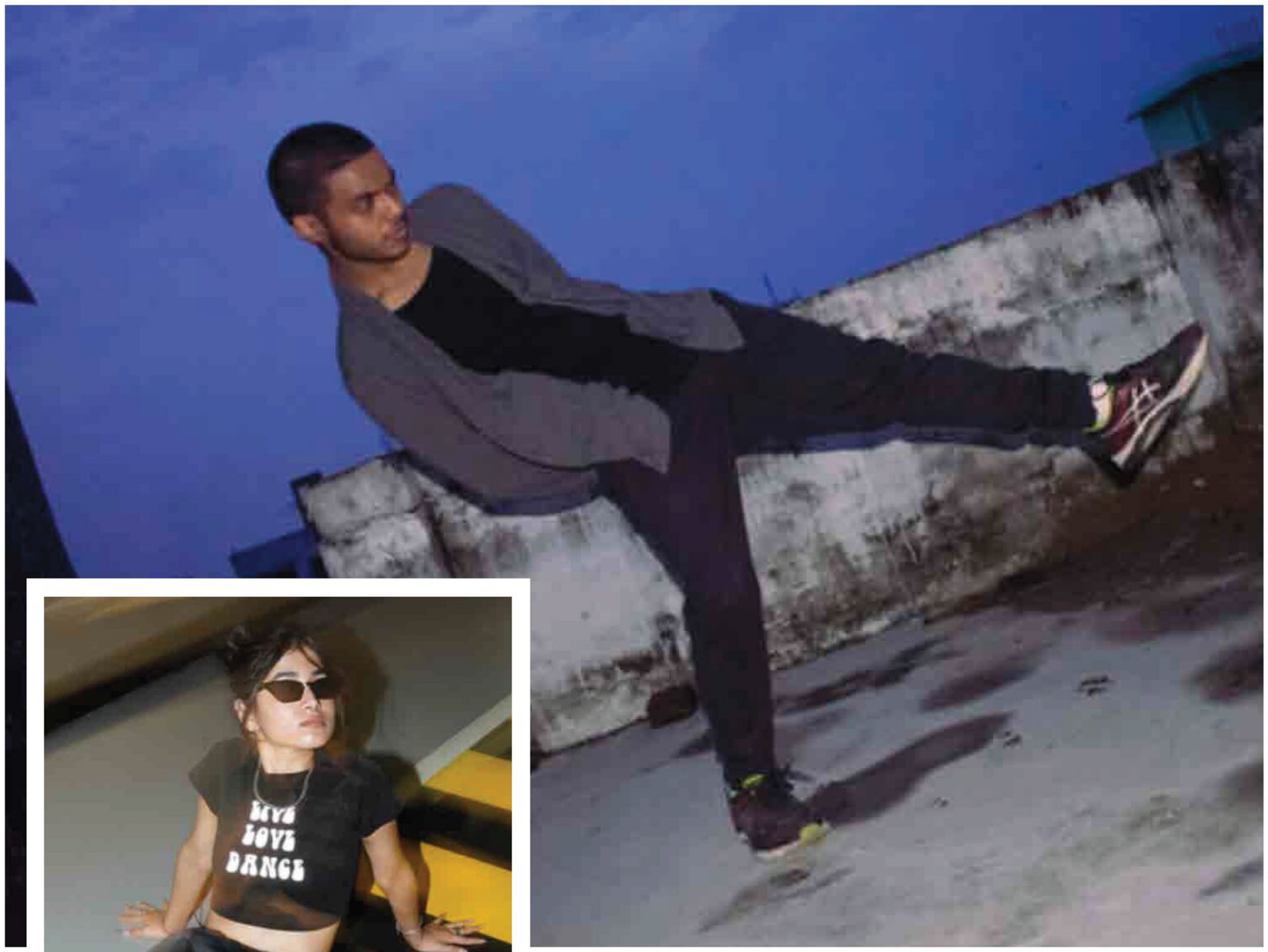
DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Zinnia Chaturvedi And Mukkubhai Collaborate on Synth Pop Track 'Somebody Else'

The song includes Eighties soundscapes juxtaposed with modern pop elements

New Delhi singer-songwriter Zinnia Chaturvedi and Kanpur producer Mukkubhai recently joined forces on the plush synth-pop track "Somebody Else." We caught up with the artists to discuss how the song came together, what it's about, future plans and more. Read below.



What can you tell us about the new single "Somebody Else?"

Mukkubhai: I started working on 'Somebody Else' in late 2020. The sound and feel were heavily inspired by Julia Michaels' single 'Lie Like This' and I was looking for a vocalist to work with on this track. I was looking to work with someone from the DU music scene and I reached out to Zinnia. She liked the rhythm and feel of the track and I was stoked to work on this with her.

Chaturvedi: 'Somebody Else' revolves around the theme of disassociating, mainly with the ones who did you wrong, displayed disrespect, and showed half-cooked remorse when convenient; be it in friendships or relationships. The lyrics offer a very straightforward message, with little reading between the lines. Both I and Mukund adjoined our thoughts in cooking up the lyrics to complete the storyline. The track also puts emphasis on my transition from being somewhat of a people pleaser to someone who has solid boundaries. On the contrary, it's spiced up with some insane disco-pop beats that drown away the noise of it all and take you to the land of absolute bliss!

What was the recording and production process like?

Chaturvedi: The vocal recording process took place at my home with my gear setup. Recording the vocals alone provided me with a lot of space of trial and error, re-takes which was absolutely exhausting. It's a task to go through a number of takes to finally settle on the right ones but it's the most rewarding thing at the same time. For the production, Mukund did a splendid job on the track as a whole, working tirelessly on the mixing and mastering. It's the best feeling to see your work coming together!

Mukkubhai: I wish I could say that the recording and production were a breeze, but we don't do this full-time, so it took it's fair amount of time. From fully recorded vocals crashing to college exams. Yes, it was a process. But I also got to work with one of the smartest, realest and exceptionally talented vocalists in the Delhi scene.

"'Somebody Else' revolves around the theme of disassociating, mainly with the ones who did you wrong," says Chaturvedi.

What's next?

Chaturvedi: I just got done with my Master's in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics and now finally can say I'm a full-time musician! Although I'm doing yet another degree but it's distant learning so it doesn't take up a great chunk of my time.

DAVID BRITTO

VISHWAS RAVINDRAN (CHATURVEDI); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Lala Releases New Pop Anthem 'Love Letters From My Ex'

The track is also accompanied by a music video

WE RECENTLY CAUGHT UP with American singer and actress Laurissa Romain aka Lala and talked to her about her latest pop track "Love Letters From My Ex." Read our interview with the artist below.

It's been two years since we interviewed you for "Barriers" – what have you been up to since then?
The last two years have been a whirlwind! After I released 'Barriers' in 2021 I spent the rest of that year finding a sound for myself, I experimented a lot, either going super R&B or super pop, even a disco record. In 2022 I challenged myself to drop a song once a month. I committed to six months on that schedule along with visuals for each song that I was directing, producing, styling, editing and even ended up coloring one of them as well. This year I want to get more intentional and really lock in a sound that feels like me, starting with my latest release titled 'Love Letters From My Ex.'

What can you tell us about your new song "Love Letters From My Ex?"
'Love Letters From My Ex' is a true story about what I was going through at the time, I had someone who wouldn't stop contacting me and even went as far as emailing and venmoing me. It started as a laugh between my friends and co-creators about times this has also happened to them and turned into what I feel is a personal anthem and an ode to that feeling of finally being free of a situation that used to hold you back and how quickly the tables can turn. With that, it truly is all love I might've made a whole song and music video about it but like I say at the end of the song, 'I do wish you the best, good luck.'

What was it like putting the video together for the song?
When creating the music video for 'Love Letters From My Ex' I wanted it to be fun, campy, and feminine! I was super fortunate to have been introduced to my now friend and co-creator, director Sabrina Roberts. She brought ideas to the table I would have never thought of. After months of planning and sending inspo back and forth she brought in executive producer Jagger Corcione and producer Sabrina Alvarez who graciously sourced an incredible 24-person crew who I genuinely could not have done this video without. I also have to note that it was the most women I've ever worked with on a set which I am beyond thrilled about specifically for this project it was super empowering to see. I got to edit the video which I always love doing and I knew it was going to be great when I was having trouble choosing between takes. You think you have an idea of what you're going into on the day and for the most part we did. Everything was so structured and planned out, everyone was in great communication with the game plan and what the final product should look like, but it truly exceeded my expectations on what it became and I am so proud of the video and all the hard work from this crew in pulling it all together.

What's next?
When we last spoke, in 2021 I had just landed my first soundtrack single on a film, in May I wrapped two new films in which I get to combine my passions for acting and music, portraying a singer and getting to open the movie with one of my original songs as well as having multiple original compositions on each of the scores. One airs this winter on BET and the other will be out next year on Paramount+. I've been in the studio a lot lately so you can definitely look forward to some new music from me soon as well as more live performances. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Sublime with Rome Release New Reggae Rock Single 'Cool & Collected,' Talk About Upcoming Album and Touring India

The song also features fellow American band Slightly Stoopid

AMERICAN ROCK BAND Sublime – comprising vocalist-guitarist Bradley Nowell, bassist Eric Wilson and drummer Bud Gaugh – churned out some of the most captivating music through the Nineties. The band's blend of rock, reggae and ska spawned hits such as "Wrong Way," "Santeria," "Badfish," "What I Got," "Caress Me Down," "40oz to Freedom" and more.

After the untimely death of Nowell in 1996, Wilson and Gaugh formed Sublime with Rome in 2009 along with frontman Rome Ramirez. Gaugh – who left the band soon after they started – was replaced with drummer Carlos Verdugo. The group's current drummer is Joe Tomino. With three albums released as Sublime with Rome, the band is now gearing up to release their next record and are out with the LP's lead single, the reggae rock number "Cool & Collected," featuring fellow American band Slightly Stoopid.

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Ramirez talks to us about the band's new song, working with Slightly Stoopid, their ongoing tour, coming to India and more. Read below.

What has the band been up to since releasing "Goodbyes" in 2019?
A lot has changed since then, and we've been keeping ourselves busy with recording new music and playing some huge national tours! We just released a new song as well and plan on releasing more as the months follow!

When did work on your new song "Cool and Collected" begin and what can you tell me about the song?
This song came together, very organically as I ran into Miles [Doughty], one of the singers of Slightly Stoopid backstage at a festival. We were just talking about how fun the summer was going to be and he had mentioned that it would be cool for us to get into the studio and record a song together. That way we could play it live every night. I thought that was a great idea and was headed to the studio the very next day to start recording our new album, so the timing was perfect. I quickly put together an idea that I felt represented both bands and I sent it over to them and they loved it and began working on it almost immediately. It truly came together naturally.

What was it like working with Slightly Stoopid on the track?
Those guys are great. They bring such a great vibe and a great contribution of musicality with their band. I love working on music with those guys and hopefully, we can do more in the future.

"There isn't a night that goes by where I don't think about Brad [Nowell] while I'm on that stage."

Is this song set to be part of a larger body of work?
Yeah, this is the first single from an upcoming album that we plan on releasing next year. We have a lot of music to trickle out until then.

The video represents your life on stage and on the road — what's the current tour been like for you guys?
This tour has been like a giant summer camp on wheels. Everybody gets along so well, and the music complements each other throughout the entire evening. We've really gotten to get to know one another and just relax and have fun. It's the way it should be.

To also address Sublime and what the band means to people, what does it mean to you to carry on the band and the late Bradley Nowell's legacy?

It's an absolute honor, and it's an absolute privilege to be the one who gets to go out there and sing the songs every night to the fans. I've been a Sublime fan my whole entire life, so this position really means the world to me. There isn't a night that goes by where I don't think about Brad while I'm on that stage.

Do you have any message for fans in India and would you ever consider touring here someday?
I have nothing but absolute love for India. It would be a dream to come out there and play music for you all! Let's make it happen. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Ji Chang-wook's Allure as an Action Hero

In an action of any kind—gun-toting shots, frantic chase sequences, clandestine operations, stunts, and duels—Ji gets hearts racing

JI CHANG-WOOK can serve as a template for an individual brand of action hero. He is more than just a stud brandishing a weapon or a savior combating detrimental authority. He boasts an innate level of poise that grasps all of what it is, which renders him an enduring action star. When he flexes his action displays, you see an imposing individual with strong management, resolve, precision, self-denial, and sensitivity lined up with amazing style—style in terms of both what he looks like and his body language, attitude, and eloquence. In action of any kind—gun-toting shots, frantic chase sequences, clandestine operations, stunts, and duels—Ji gets hearts racing.

I mean, I could watch *Healer* (2014–2015) over and over. His starring role in the classic action thriller expedited Ji's ascent to Hallyu stardom. The plot centers on a murder perpetrated by a group and draws along an ensemble of protagonists: a deft fighter in disguise, a reporter, and a reputable journalist.

Ji rocked a valiant Seo Jung-hoo, a shady night courier nicknamed "Healer." His chic all-black attire juxtaposed the buccaneering image he gave off, exposing more of his stature. At the same time, his antics and manifestations of frailty were distinct. It may seem tricky to fully comprehend his character right off the bat. That said, Jung-hoo excels at keeping people invested. I love how he handles facing challenges while still embodying the derring-do he offers. In 20 high-caliber action episodes littered with intrigue and adrenaline, he mirrors a formidable swashbuckler.

Action, I suspect, qualifies as an art form for the actor in that he wants to make a scene that is not just startling or outraged but also attractive. So, each time he delivers a confrontation or an orchestrated action sequence, he attempts to pull off something new. In doing so, he lends the character and the portrayal a distinctive flair and personality. It reminds me of the legendary public bathhouse combat scene from The *K2* (2016), where Ji battles and knocks down a bunch of other men in defense.

Despite the slander that has been leveled at this scene, it was brilliantly planned and photographed, along with the actor's performance, which will live on in memory. Not forgetting how he aced the proceedings to make it look fantastic when it was a physically demanding and bold instance—given the men were nude (their private parts remained blurred)—Ji's perfectly chiseled body amplified the impact of his presence and the final outcome.

One of Ji's recognized action roles is Kim Je-ha in The *K2*. He is an insanely trained ex-mercenary soldier who flees upon being erroneously accused of homicide and is later recruited by an authority figure to guard his daughter once he discovers his expertise. Ji allegedly accomplished the action shots himself. He went through extensive instruction that gave Je-ha a more realistic face.

The *K2* purportedly employed the "Bullet Time effect" a la *The Matrix* for the first time in a K-drama and had Ji

PHOTO: TVN, COURTESY OF IMDB

doing jujitsu, aikido, and taekwondo like a pro. Again, though, what took me off guard was having him as an offbeat action hero, one whose vulnerability propelled him above his rugged exterior to a more desirable one.

That desirability, as I listed before, also stems from his dashing, dapper appearance. Retaliating against the unscrupulous emanates all the oomph that makes him more of who he is: his sleek and classy form and all-pervasive magnetism. No matter how awful a blow may be, even if he is bleeding and soaking a great deal, he will never lose sight of his goal or his composure. And the visual appeal I'm referring to—which, as I envision, is back again in his next—never goes wrong. Ji's upcoming television series, *The Worst of Evil*, plays out in the 1990s and has him as Park Joon-mo, a cop, as a key player who penetrates a sizable criminal gang responsible for the illicit transit of drugs between Korea, China, and Japan.

Ji Chang-wook's appeal as an action hero strikes on a deeper level that relies on his infectious drive as an artist who keeps evolving and accomplishing with all of his faculties. It must be a thing that maintains his individuality—he is passionate about taking chances, has a great intellect, a great body, and, I reiterate, an enviable face. I can't wait to catch him exploding all over again in *The Worst of Evil*. At this time, an older, wiser, and more mature Ji and his sense of action timing may just be quite a step above.

The Worst of Evil will premiere on *Disney+* on September 27.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

Six Memorable K-Drama Characters of Kim Soo-hyun

He continuously reaffirms that he is a surprise in that he has an unfathomable acting style that is simultaneously attractive and appropriate for what he undertakes on camera

Kim Soo-hyun in a K-drama exudes enticement—something completely disparate. His expressions transmit a wealth of details about the emotions and mental states of those he portrays, and the rest that remains is more than made up for by his superb screen presence and, of course, his method acting. His passionate, precise interpretations certainly grant him that weight as a performing artist. Kim is, indeed, an elite player—a savant in Korean entertainment who might reveal an entirely diverse facet of any given character; six such are listed below.

Dream High

Song Sam-dong – *Dream High* (2011)

Following *Dream High*'s success as a staggering teen musical drama, Kim sparked multiple nods. Being a country yokel—a musical whiz—but battling an uncommon medical condition earned him the KBS Drama Awards' Best New Actor and Popularity Awards. His portrayal of Sam-dong's plight and his underlying pain was most notably impressive. Based on Naver news, Kim trained extensively at JYP Entertainment to hone his vocal and choreographic skills so he might do effectively next to K-pop idol actors such as Bae Suzy and Ok Taec-yeon.

Lee Hwon, King of Joseon – *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012)

Kim has perpetually had an eye fixated on the heights but at all times has remained grounded, which is arguably the most significant credit that nets his benefits. "I am very grateful for this moment, but I am ashamed as well. It's like having a lot of homework. I'll keep trying to become a better actor to remain worthy of this award," Kim told *JoongAng Daily* after claiming the Best Actor (TV) award at the 48th Baeksang Arts Awards, despite seasoned actors in the fray. This was in recognition of his illustrious role in this epic fantasy K-drama featuring the intimate love story of the monarch and a female shaman set against the strains and machinations of warring political camps.

Moon Embracing the Sun

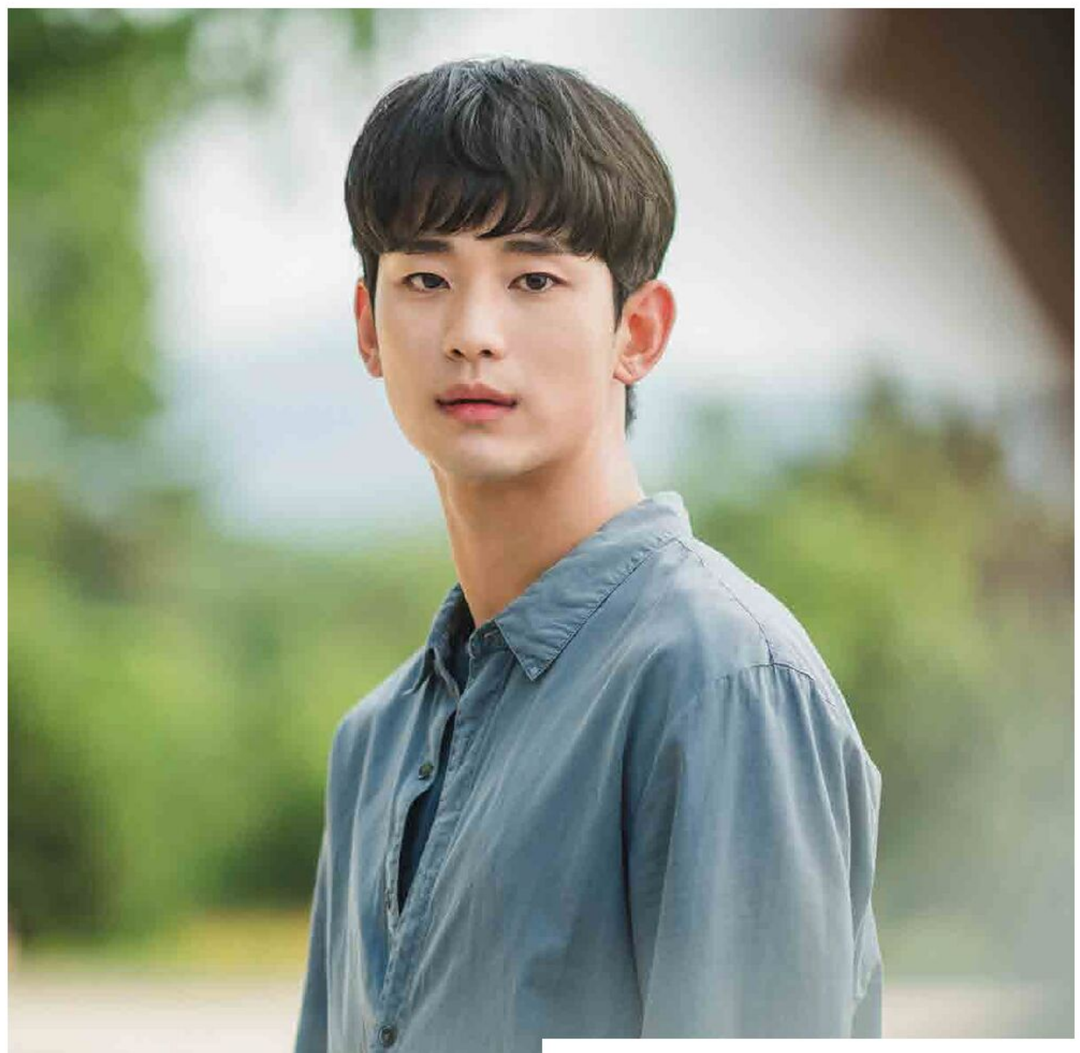
Do Min-joon – *My Love from the Star* *(2013-2014)*

The actor obviously enjoys inhabiting unknowns, which spurs him to push harder on emoting distinct roles, particularly demanding ones like Do Min-joon. For what he did in this classic K-drama, Kim drew sweeping approval worldwide. He cemented his reputation as a Hallyu phenomenon and a television juggernaut in Korea with his rendition of Min-joon, the extraterrestrial who descends from the stars. Juxtaposed with the feisty, stylish alien with heightened athletic powers, he nailed another face of the character, tempered with genuine care that flooded across as he sought Jun Ji-hyun on-screen.

Baek Seung-chan – *The Producers* *(2015)*

Seung-chan, a zealous lawyer, joins KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) for a cause, taking on a tyro producer-director with the variety/entertainment division in this comedy-drama television series. Considering the huge ratings hit of *My Love from the Star*, Kim, and screenwriter Park Ji-eun officially reunited for *The Producers*, touted as the most-awaited show of 2015. The series, however, for its exaggerated picture of producers as weak in handling celebrities, save for a few rare instances, opened to a conflicting reception. But Kim, as a standard, gave his best while also being credited for his comic timing.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB; HANCINEMA

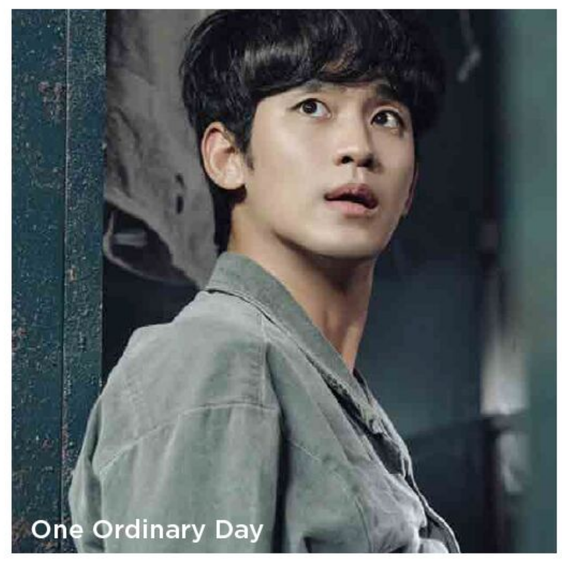


It's Okay to Not Be Okay

Moon Gang-tae – *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* *(2020)*

Moon Gang-tae—a psychiatric unit caretaker who crosses paths with a rowdy children's book author—was the artist's dramatic resurgence. The story saw favorable critiques and rose to be one of the highest-rated Korean dramas in cable television history, attributable to its novel concept, aesthetic appeal, character development, and focus on mental health.

As Gang-tae, Kim was a perfect emulation of the character's grappling with loss and sorrow: one who endures obligation but never strays out of it; a man missing love who still heals people while masking his personal scars. And indeed, underneath the entirety of the pain, he figures a radically different lover, risking all for those he values. Most deservingly, Kim picked up acknowledgment for the performance, winning the Daesang (or "Grand Prize") at the 5th Asia Artist Awards in the television category.



One Ordinary Day

Kim Hyun-soo – *One Ordinary Day* *(2021)*

Kim's taste for darker narrative nuances and a flair for challenging themes and roles are clear. His work in *One Ordinary Day*, the Korean version of the British TV series *Criminal Justice*, is a noteworthy instance of that. He plays an average college guy who accidentally finds himself a crucial suspect in a grisly murder case after being implicated by circumstantial evidence. Kim was top-notch even though the drama was not feted very well. He reaffirmed that he is a surprise in that he has an unfathomable acting style that is simultaneously attractive and appropriate for what he undertakes on camera. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

Why Do Korean Dystopian Narratives Keep Us Engaged?

They are entirely worst-case scenarios—bleak and frightening—but they are also rife with enigma, which often leaves us agog

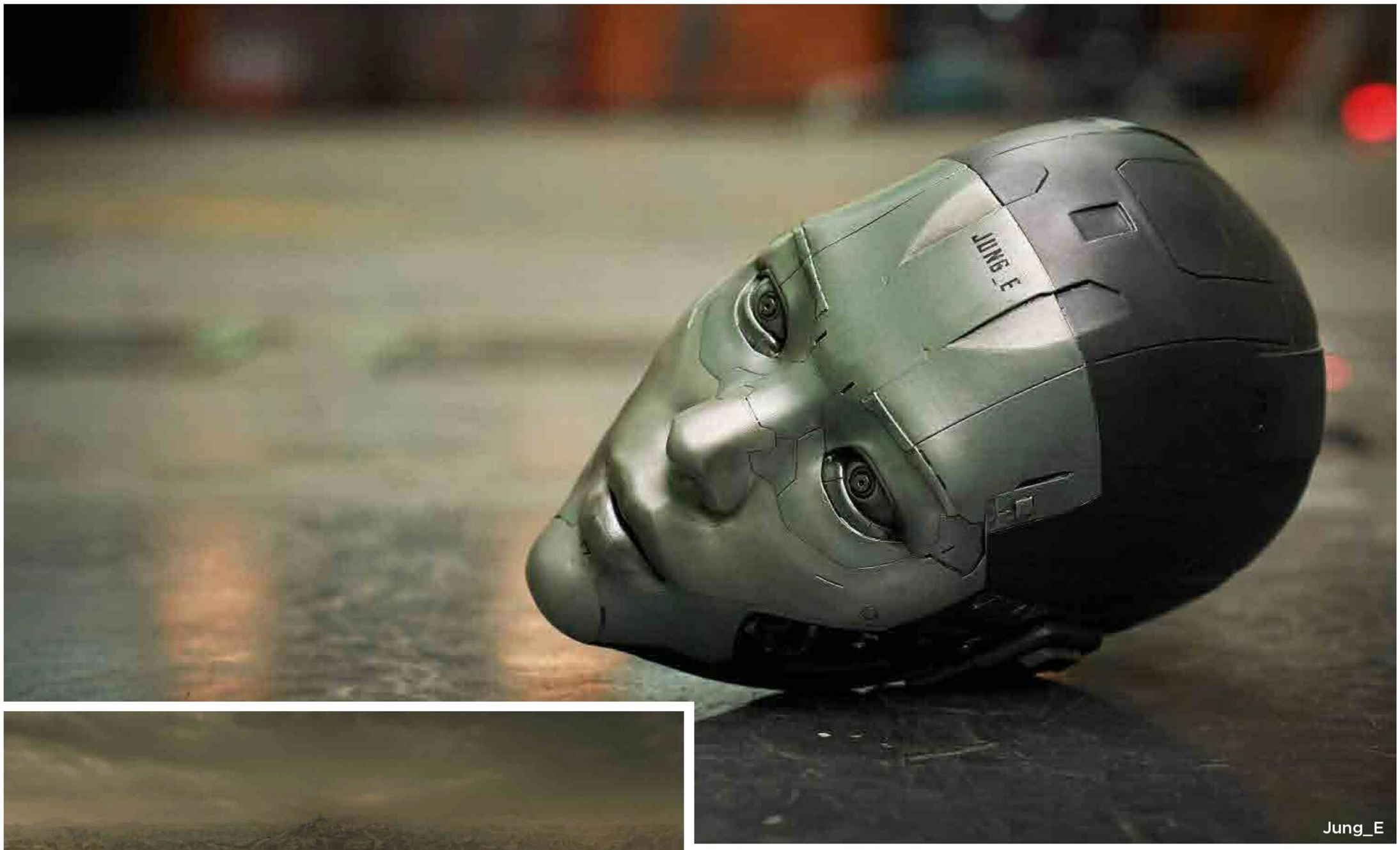
Conversely to an ideal utopian society devoid of criminality and brute force, the dystopian ethos is fraught with dread, authoritarianism, or other traits symptomatic of an impending doom within the social fabric. While dystopia and dystopian fiction are entirely worst-case scenarios—bleak and frightening—they are also rife with enigma, which often leaves us agog. Dystopia comes across as a nightmarish, dark future where phobias are deeply ingrained. Korean dystopian narratives, in that sense, provide us with a vivid glimpse of a comparable condition and occasionally may also hint at a dog-eat-dog Korean culture.

As in the 2092 scenario of *Space Sweepers* (2021), dystopia in science fiction mostly stresses the serious repercussions of how things stand. In the space blockbuster, the UTS firm creates an alien civilization where Kim Tae-ho (Song Joong-ki), Captain Jang (Kim Tae-ri), Tiger Park (Jin Seon-kyu), and a robot dubbed Bubs, dwell as space sweepers after Earth becomes unfit for life. Digging through debris, they uncover Victory, a wrecked spaceship with a young girl inside (sought by the "UTS Space Guards"), and plan to demand a ransom in exchange for her.

Space Sweepers directed by Jo Sung-hee was Korea's first shot at a space-based movie and is resplendent in its space spectacle; it is also blatantly dystopian, notably with regards to the siege

Hellbound

Space Sweepers



Jung_E

Black Knight

of Mars, likened to the affluent putting together Armageddon.

The Korean dystopian drama's creative vision of a dystopian world replete with tensions and apprehensions raises all the red flags of a looming cataclysm and its repercussions. The widely acknowledged *Hellbound* (2021) can be accredited as an ideal case in point. Its events unfold between 2022 and 2027, when South Korea becomes ground zero, where, by issuing decrees that condemn some to hell at a given time, an unearthly visage abruptly begins to manifest. In a sublime demonstration, three colossal apparitions emerge at the designated time to chastise the targets, ripping and searing them in the process. Conspiratorial groups—the gang-like Arrowhead group and the cult-like New Truth Society—begin to capitalize on public dread at this juncture.

The intricate plot analysis and characterization of how human morality disintegrates amid a catastrophe serve as a stand-in for a parallel that may hit hard, possibly harder, notwithstanding the monsters and their harrowing monstrosities that appear less reasonable. It is the lionized Yeon Sang-ho's painstakingly produced spook, too graphic and savage, with images that are abominable, unnerving, and at the same time leave you contemplating; zapped even thanks to its top-notch production—its mind-bending VFX.

Director Yeon's subsequent sci-fi *Jung_E* (2023) is also an effective dystopian realm that artfully integrates artificial intelligence in fiction, intense action, and an ironic critique of greed while maintaining a poignant mother-daughter chronicle at its heart. In 1872, Samuel Butler shed light on artificial intelligence in his *Erewhon*. Since then, a slew of robot uprising stories has examined the implications of such intelligence. The most prominent is Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, starring the lethal HAL 9000 as opposed to R2-D2 from 1977's *Star Wars* and the titular robot from 2008's *WALL·E*.

This time, an analogous *Jung_E* follows a researcher at an AI lab attempting to make a robot by cloning the brain of her mother, the legendary mercenary Jung E. On a dead, desolate Earth spurred by climate change, events transpire in the 22nd century. In the throes of chaos, when a war breaks out within the bunker built for human survival, its outcome depends on whether it is possible to design an automated robot equivalent to Jung E.

Pollution wreaking havoc on the ecosystem is a recurring theme in dystopia, as in one of the more successful contemporary Korean dystopian titles, *Black Knight* (2023), helmed by Cho Ui-seok and centered on Lee Yoon-gyun's webtoon *Delivery Knight*. It is 2071 in *Black Knight*, and being without a respirator isn't easy in a dire, air-polluted Korea. Delivery men are vital for the minority of locals to remain alive. One day, Sa-wol (Kang Yoo-seok), a refugee dreaming of being a delivery driver, stumbles upon 5-8 (Kim Woo-bin), a famed delivery man with incredible fighting skills. The two and a few more join forces later against the Cheonmyeong Group, an enormous power structure that currently holds sway over all of humanity.

The portrayal's highlight is how relatable its post-apocalyptic setting for nihilism and horror is. As we are drawn further and further into an epidemic-ridden, eerie society, the black knights emerge as heroes despite the noxious landscape, and our impression of their heroism is only reinforced when we see them—they are the frontline workers standing tall, conjuring a fantastic metaphor for life within a dying civilization. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

NETFLIX, COURTESY OF HANCINEMA; IMDB

Actor You Need to Know: Zo In-sung

Zo is conspicuous in how full-grown the character he creates is. He goes in-depth with the character's life, forging a bond with him, which ideally serves a narrative and speaks to us

THE LONGER he is on screen, the more engaging the scene becomes. That would mean Zo In-sung—the sightly Korean star, a stud of a man, and one heck of an actor who just gets better with age. You get the drift if you're watching his latest, *Moving*, the webtoon-based magnum opus of superheroes—a sci-fi action fantasy K-drama. Zo has Kim Doo-sik, code-named Moon-san, a free-swinging debonaire NIS (National Intelligence Service) black ops operative who can fly. He is also the ex-NIS agent of extraordinary senses, Lee Mi-hyun's (Han Hyo-joo's) husband. Their romance is all heart, compelling story arc aside. When they are edging past each other, interacting, or whatever, that chemistry is insane, and Zo, in all facets of his persona, never ceases to make a statement.

Setting about as a model, he transitioned into acting through sitcoms, starring in the anthological teen drama *School 3* (2000) but impressing as the renegade, irate Lee Kyung-ho breaking eventually into the gangland within the praised *Piano* (2001), a melodrama of a loving father and an illicit affair between stepsiblings.

Zo is conspicuous in how full-grown the character he creates is. I assume he goes in-depth with the character's life, forging a bond with him, which ideally serves a narrative and speaks to us. And that must have been his thing early on, in that he rapidly cut a leading role in the drama *Shoot for the Stars* (2002), portraying the dyslexic Sung-tae, an aspiring actor who becomes a household name despite challenges with the help of his manager.

That same year, with *Public Toilet*, he debuted in cinema, and the years that

followed defined an illustrious period of his widespread fame. In his part as Sang-min, in love with Son Ye-jin's Ji-hye, Zo hit an enormity thanks to the archetypal Korean romantic film *The Classic* (2003). In due course, coveted Best Actor honors at the Baeksang Arts Awards and the SBS Drama Awards followed Zo's triumphant return to television as Jung Jae-min in the histrionic blockbuster *Something Happened in Bali* (2004). His genius in getting across Jae-min's thoughts and inner turmoil, as well as embodying the conceited playboy who commits suicide in the final moments, reiterated his evocative maturity.

"Black or white, good parts are hard to come by," the decorated American actor Denzel Washington once said, elucidating, "A good actor with a good opportunity has a shot; without the opportunity, it doesn't matter how good you are." Zo is analogously a great actor who embraces a role, makes it his own, and thrives in it, but largely because he has had great characters along the way. He appeared as Eun-sup, a doctor, in the K-drama rendition of the Japanese drama *Heaven's Coin*, titled *Spring Day* (2005). His following two movie releases were helmed by the revered director Yoo Ha: 2006's *A Dirty Carnival*, starring Zo as a suave mobster Kim Byung-doo pursuing happiness, and 2008's epic saga *A Frozen Flower*, having him as military commander Hong-rim entwined in love with the king and the queen.

Perhaps Zo is always quite up to par as a romantic hero, bringing feelings to the forefront with such profundity. Together with Song Hye-kyo, his work in the 2013 mega-hit romance *That Winter, the Wind Blows* was phenomenal to a fault. Zo had an avid gambler and scam artist infiltrating the life of a blind heiress (Song) with an ulterior motive. But as fate would have it, they grow closer to each other and fall in love. Later, partnering with Gong Hyo-jin in the medical drama *It's Okay, That's Love* (2014), Zo played a sought-after writer who is humorous yet haughty and also suffers from a mental health condition. His efforts in the role won him the prestigious Daesang ("Grand Prize") at the APAN Star Awards.

The actor is a dominant force that stems from his use of an intrinsic skill to engage with strong emotions. A host of his ensuing films were all blockbusters, a testament to his formidable presence. As much of a coup, he was a prosecutor in *The King* (2017), rising to glory and back to insignificance, and so was his knockout leader Yang Manchun in *The Great Battle* (2018). He became the cutting-edge intelligence officer Kang Dae-jin in the tense *Escape from Mogadishu* (2021), while also displaying his feat of strength as an opulent, fierce, and crafty Sergeant Kwon in *Smugglers* (2023).

Cutting to the bone, Zo In-sung, 42, is certainly a force to be reckoned with, perhaps one of the strongest in his league. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF IOK COMPANY

Q&A

RZA

The Wu-Tang legend on the state of rap, being honored by Rihanna and A$AP, and the possibility of a new Wu album

By ANDRE GEE

It's the middle of summer when RZA hops on Zoom one afternoon, but the Wu-Tang architect and Hollywood maven isn't exactly taking it easy. The Wu-Tang Clan are on tour with Nas for the overseas leg of their New York State of Mind Tour, thrilling crowds while exemplifying the possibilities for hip-hop icons entering middle age. "We have to show the young generation that this can be a lifelong career if you follow the proper path," he says.

RZA, 54, parlayed his music into a decades-long career in Hollywood, acting, producing, and scoring films such as *American Gangster* and *The Man With the Iron Fists*. He also helmed *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*, a three-season-long TV series about the legendary group. These days, RZA says, he's waiting out the Writers Guild strike while touring the world and running 36 Chambers, his vegan-lifestyle company. He's still making music, too, most recently last year's *Saturday Afternoon Kung Fu Theater*, a collaboration with DJ Scratch. And, it turns out, he's just heard something that makes him excited about the possibility of another Wu-Tang album.

We're at Hip-Hop 50. What do you think are some of the biggest things that the community needs to be asking itself heading into the next 50 years?

We're at the base of the mountain, not at the top. Somebody tweeted recently that "we are still not aligned." I think we need to align. Maybe get some of the godfathers to come together and talk about what we're going to do with this culture, and how we're going to protect it, preserve it, and advance it.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame didn't come immediately [to hip-hop]. We're happy that now they're inducting some of us. Great. Let's make the Hip-Hop Hall of Fame. The BET hip-hop awards is cool. Love BET. But it's not from us — it's corporate. We need people of the culture to govern and guide the culture.

The *Wu-Tang: American Saga* show chronicles your five-year plan for the group, where you planned Wu's triumph as a group and the solo albums to follow. As you revisited those moments, did it make you wish you had done some things differently?

Not too many things. I think that what I did was necessary. I think that it was ordained. One day, Jay-Z told me, "Yo, I got [the idea for] *The Blueprint* from you." At that time, I was headed to Hollywood already. Now, here's a path, here's a way it can work. And it continued to work in different regions of the country and with different crews.

What do you think Ol' Dirty Bastard would be up to these days? I feel like he'd be the most viral person ever.

[*Laughs.*] He was such a unique talent. He had a couple of left turns that was pretty off course from the person who he really was. I think he would've found his way back on his right path, and potentially would've been one of the greatest artists alive. Who is the greatest artist alive? Let's ask ourselves that real quick.

Stevie Wonder.

Stevie Wonder. He's a great example. It's like ODB will probably be at least 50 percent at that level of popularity in the world. And whether it was his music, his voice, or whatever he was doing every day, he was going to continue to grow to be a globally recognized energy.

What are the chances of a new Wu-Tang album?

We're still here on the Earth, all praises due. We're having a great run on this tour. We're laughing with each other, sharing music with each other. There were a couple of [tracks] I heard that sound like it's very possible. [One in particular] I didn't produce, but I heard it and gave my notes. [Wu producer and DJ] Allah Mathematics went into the studio and took heed to the notes.

Was that something with all the members on the track, or a lot of them?

No, it wasn't a "Triumph" type of joint. It just had that Wu spirit.

Can you speak to how artists like you and the other Wu-Tang members, Nas, Busta Rhymes, Jay-Z, and others are forging a new path for rappers into middle age?

People thought hip-hop was just youth culture. We had no examples like rock & roll, where you have the Rolling Stones playing into their seventies, or the Eagles or Earth, Wind, and Fire. The brothers you just named, Nas, Jay-Z, Wu-Tang, Busta, Joey Cracks, Outkast, pioneered this global success. Not taking nothing from Run-D.M.C. or Rakim and all of them, who also [pioneered hip-hop in the Eighties], but it was the Nineties when the constant multiplatinums just kept coming.

Now, here we are, living different lifestyles than our parents. At 50 years old, my grandfather was already looking at a wheelchair. You look at Method Man, he got more muscles than ever. He's on some Hercules shit at 50. Our strength and our vitality is there.

You play a lot of chess. What are some of your most memorable matches with other notable people?

DANIEL HASTINGS

My most notable is actually with a brother who passed away named Emory Tate. He was a six-time military champion and international master. Chess was bugged out in the Seventies because it was the Cold War. He got to go to different Army bases and play; they said they wanted to kill him and take his brain because he was whipping ass so bad. Tate was this very unique Black man who loved the game, served his country, and was a fascinating individual.

But on a celebrity level, we get busy. Right now, it's me and my buddy Rob Morgan, and before our brother Jamie Foxx had to take a sit-down for a little while, we had an ongoing rivalry.

People will say it's a rivalry, but it's only one person winning. Was it a back-and-forth rivalry?

[*Laughs.*] I let them tell the rest of it. I am the Abbot.

How did you react when you heard that Rihanna and A$AP Rocky named their kid after you?

It's an honor. It has such an energy and relevance to it. The R in RZA is for "rule" or "ruler." And to rule something, the first thing you got to try to do is rule yourself, rule your lower and higher nature. A ruler is also something we use to measure things. And so therefore, you have to measure your movements, your ideas, and where you stand at all times before you make your next move to that Z. So to me, that's a beautiful name.

Did they just call you and tell you? Or ask you? Or how did that go?

I'll leave all that in the air. Just saying I was aware of it.

Recently, you said that you felt like hip-hop was going in a one-sided direction in terms of songs that depict violence, but not the full scope of the tragedy that's behind the violence. What do you think it would take to reverse that dynamic?

[It's on] the artists. Open the door for more of them. Sometimes our system gets hooked on the hamburger and french fries because they sell and they're cheaper to produce.

But you got to open up the door and let the art go. If you go back and check some of that history, whether it's Wu-Tang, Outkast, the Roots, Jay-Z, you'll see that the system let them be, opened the door, and let them try it. The industry has to get back to that. The labels got to get back to that, letting it breathe. Even McDonald's is not stupid. When Kentucky Fried Chicken is bubbling, they got to come with the McChicken.

What's your day-to-day like these days? How intent are you about not spreading yourself too thin with all your ventures?

I live my culture. And whether it's the hip-hop culture, or it's my spirituality through Islam, and the study of Buddha, and the great Christ, I live this. If you look at my company, 36 Chambers, which is a vegan-lifestyle company, that's exactly what I am.

Right now, we doing this New York State of Mind Tour. It's not easy to get up, leave your family, fly around the world, go through airport security, or be on a damn bus, and do it night after night. The joy of it for me is that when I come back home, I come home to that heaven that I wanted to build on Earth, where all my 12 jewels of life exist, my knowledge, wisdom, understanding is there, my culture, freedom, and equality is there. So Superman goes to his Fortress of Solitude after saving the world. He's got to go back to the Arctic and sit down and reminisce off his mother and father's history and all those things. And I follow that path.

BRINGING DA RUCKUS Onstage at the 2023 BottleRock Napa Valley festival in California in May

The Abbot's Greatest Hits

1. 'Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)' 1993
Wu's debut kicked off RZA's five-year plan to turn the group into icons. Mission accomplished.

2. Raekwon's 'Only Built for Cuban Linx' 1995
Raekwon's Pyrex parables made for an all-time rap classic. RZA produced it to perfection.

3. 'Afro Samuri' 2007
RZA scored this animated TV series, lacing the fictional warrior's journey with gravitas.

4. 'American Gangster' 2007
RZA has acted in nearly 40 films, including this standout turn as a cop.

5. 'The Man With the Iron Fists' 2012
RZA made his directorial debut with this martial-arts extravaganza.

What can we expect to see coming from the RZA for the rest of 2023?

We're looking forward to continuing the New York State of Mind Tour. It'll hit the USA in September. Wu-Tang and Hot 97 are going to rock Madison Square Garden. And, of course, I'm waiting for the strike to end to get back to making some new films.

I'm also looking to do a radio show in New York City. Been talking to a couple of good brothers — Grandmaster Flash, LL [Cool J]. I was DJ'ing since I was 11 years old. So it would be fun for me to play around in that world for a little bit. We're talking to [Hot] 97 right now, which owns two stations. They got 97, they got WBLS.

You also got Rock the Bells Radio, which LL is doing a great job with over there. I told him a Wu Wednesday would be nice, right? ®

FROM TOP: TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

The latest single off the singer's upcoming 30-track LP is the Beatles classic 'Let It Be,' which features Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Peter Frampton and Mick Fleetwood

DOLLY PARTON TALKS NEW ALBUM 'ROCKSTAR,' CURRENT STATE OF COUNTRY MUSIC AND WANTING TO COME TO INDIA

By DAVID BRITTO

VIJAT MOHINDRA/COURTESY OF BUTTERFLY RECORDS

DOLLY PARTON

When we sit down to chat with American country music royalty, Rock and Roll Hall of Famer and multi–Grammy Award winner Dolly Parton, over a Zoom call, she's at her effervescent best and comes across as such a kind soul. Parton – who was speaking to us from her Nashville office and studio – recently released the fourth single, "Let It Be," off her much anticipated 30-track album *Rockstar*, which is due to be released in full on November 17th, 2023, via Butterfly Records and Big Machine Records. Most of *Rockstar* includes a host of household names as collaborators and "Let It Be," the 1970 Beatles hit, is no different. The song features two of the original Beatles, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr as well as Peter Frampton (from the Herd and Humble Pie) and Mick Fleetwood (of Fleetwood Mac).

In this exclusive interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Parton talks to us about working with legends of rock music such as McCartney and Starr among others on her new album, wanting to visit India someday, her various other projects and more. Read below.

As one of the most adored country artists ever, I am very interested to know about the role rock music had on you.
Well, I think most people in the United States have been influenced by rock n' roll. I think really all over the world in the early days of people like Elvis [Presley] and Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, Chubby Checker and all of the great people that we loved in our young years. But my husband is a really big rock n' roll fan, and we've been together so many years. I've heard some of the greatest rock music ever because of him. And so, I just thought, 'Well, why don't I just go ahead and do a rock album now that they've gone and put me in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame [in 2022].'

What was it that set you out to make this new record *Rockstar*?
Well, when they wanted to put me in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, at that time I did not feel that I had earned the title to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And I didn't want to take any votes from someone else that had spent their life in rock n' roll, their place in the Hall of Fame. But then they went ahead and put me in any way, and I just wanted to feel like I had earned the right to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and let the rock artists know how I felt about that and asked them if some of them would participate if I decided to do a rock n' roll album in order to earn my keep and to really feel that I had earned a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And that's kind of how it all came about, feeling like I wanted to earn the title of being in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. So I think the album turned out really well. I'm very proud. I kept recording songs that I loved, and they kept mounting up till we actually recorded about 30 songs. We've got some wonderful artists on some of the more classic songs. We got some of the great classic artists as well.

I want to ask you about the record's latest single — "Let It Be" — the Beatles classic and of course you have two of the Beatles featured on the song — what was it like working with Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr?
Well, you can imagine how a thing like that would make you feel. I didn't know if I would be able to pull that off, but they were both so generous about it. Paul McCartney and I have met on a few occasions and we like each other as people. But then when I called Paul to see if he would be willing to sing with me on that, he said, 'Yeah and I'll play the piano if you want me to.' And I said, 'Well, of course I want you to.' And so he did play the piano and did sing. Then I thought, 'Wow, wouldn't it be cool to have Ringo Starr on the same record?' Because that's the last of the Beatles. But then, of course, they have good friends and so we had a couple of other people join us. Peter Frampton played that great guitar solo on it and Mick Fleetwood did some of the acoustic things along with Ringo there, I guess they're all big buddies, so I really felt like I really hit the jackpot with all those great people on the same record.

I've been fortunate enough to hear the whole album ahead of its release and there are so many classics on it such as "Purple Rain," "Free Bird," "Stairway to Heaven," "What's Up" and more. What was your thought process in picking the songs that made it to the final 30?
Well, I tried to do songs that I knew my husband loved as I had mentioned he's a huge rockstar, but I had a few songs that I loved as well, so I did so many of the songs that were his favorites, and then I wrote a few or co-wrote some with Kent Wells, who did an amazing job producing the album, we wrote a few things together and some of my own songs that we put on. But I just picked the songs that I thought I could sing the best, that were best suited for my voice. So we just kept recording songs, I never intended to record 30 songs. I just kept recording it, and I remembered another song that I loved. So, by the time I was finished, we had 30 some songs for us to choose. And we said, well, 'I'm never going to do another rock album, so why not just make this an event and put all these songs down.'

So we're going to have vinyls and a two-set CD and there's even some little cassettes I think they have on the rock album as well, some collector's item things. So anyway, it just turned out to be just a whole big deal and a lot of wonderful, wonderful big-time stars like Elton John and Pink and Brandy Carlisle. We've got Steven Tyler and Steve Perry and some of the greatest people... Stevie Nicks. We just got some of the best people ever in rock music on this album.

> "I JUST PICKED THE SONGS THAT I THOUGHT I COULD SING THE BEST, THAT WERE BEST SUITED FOR MY VOICE."

Is there an anecdote that sticks out from the recording process with any of these people that you can tell me about?
Well, some of my favorite memories was when Anne Wilson came down and we did 'Magic Man' together. Just being in the studio, just hearing our voices and just trying to out sing each other. At least keep up with each other because I really felt like I had bit off a lot, and I was hoping I could chew it. It really got to be like a fun thing. Same with Stevie Nicks. We were in the studio, she came down for a few days and she came over when I was even recording some other things, but we were in the studio together. We had just such a fun time. Same with Deborah Harry on 'Heart of Glass.' She came down and that was great, just hearing us being in the studio. But I think probably one of my favorite moments of all was John Fogerty. I'd always loved the Creedence Clearwater Revival group. So, there's a song called 'Long as I Can See the Light,' and John came down and we put just a little group together and we recorded that live right there on the session, just like we used to record in the old days. Others had to put their vocals down in a studio somewhere else, so I wasn't in the studio with all of these people at the same time. So, the moments that I loved, that I treasured the most was with the ones that I actually did get to be in the studio with.

GETTY IMAGES

DOLLY PARTON

GETTY IMAGES

I want to ask about the Grand Ole Opry and country music in general. From the time you began as an artist and currently what's going on in the world of country music, what differences have you noticed and if anything is there anything you would change?
Oh, you never can say you change anything. I love the fact that country music has done so well and has stayed so prominent through the years and has just grown and grown and grown. I really think it's probably the most important music in the world right now and there's so many people that are based in country music, even like Taylor Swift, she kind of had that early part of being steeped in that country music world and feel. And so, I'm just proud that it keeps going, but there's going to always be some of those artists that go back to the real authentic sound. Like when I first started or like Hank Williams or some of the greats of all time, there's going to be people that find that, love that, know that and want to preserve that. But the fact that country music has done so well, I've always been so proud to be part of it and I think all the country artists have been influenced to some degree, by so much of the rock feel like Elvis [Presley] and Jerry Lee Lewis and some of the people that I grew up loving too. So, it's not that far-fetched that I would do this rock album, especially since they put me in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but my country fans seem to be very proud of the fact that I've done this.

Are there any new country artists that are currently catching your eye?
Oh, I really am amazed with all the new ones coming up doing whatever they do. I just admire and respect the new talent that come in and I'm always very touched when some of the new female artists say that they've kind of watched my career and have been influenced by the fact that I'm a writer, that I did well early on as a female writer and singer and that I kind of have a history of growing up and building my career back in in the day when there were less women in it. But I just admire and respect any and all of them that are doing good.

Have you ever had any relation with India? Has there ever been a time you were offered to perform here?
I have never been to India, and I've always wanted to go. I don't know if I have a huge following there or not. I may have to make it a point to come there. But I tell you what I did do, there's one of our Indian friends here, a guy from India, his name is Vijat [Mohindra]. He did all the photography for my rock album. All those beautiful, beautiful things. He's done a lot of work with Miley Cyrus and Miley of course, we have a song 'Wrecking Ball' on my new album, Miley sang it with me, but she also kind of recommended the photographer that we used. And he did an unbelievable job. So that's Vijat.

So, would you ever consider coming to perform in India?
Well, I would consider it. I'm not touring anymore. I do special shows here and there now and then, mostly for charity things these days, because I do so much work here, doing TV and movies and some of my business things that I'm doing with Dollywood and all. But I would someday love to come. I would love to perform, but I have no plans to do that in the near future.

> "I LOVE THE FACT THAT COUNTRY MUSIC HAS DONE SO WELL AND HAS STAYED SO PROMINENT THROUGH THE YEARS AND HAS JUST GROWN"

With the album coming out later this year, what's keeping you busy right now?
Well, just running all the business things that I have to do. I'm actually working at the moment on several projects, but I'm working on my life story for Broadway and I'm writing all the music and I'm co-writing the script too, because it's something very close to me of course. So, I'm hoping to have that on Broadway within a year or so.

What's next after this album is out?
Well, I don't plan to tour with this album. I'm sure we'll drop several singles, but I'm still involved. I hope to have a cosmetic line and maybe a clothesline at some point. I have, Doggy Parton, which is like a line of little accessories and fun things for little dogs. So, we're always coming up with something new and different and we have a new book out called *Behind the Seams: My Life in Rhinestones*, and it really chronicles my whole career from when I started as a little child in the business all the way up to now with the different designers, different clothes, the different looks and the wigs and all, so we're promoting that. I wake up with new dreams every day. ®

AP DHILLON — UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

As he settles into superstardom and unlocks a new phase in his career, the genre-defying musician weighs in on evolution, representation and the importance of being himself

By NIDHI GUPTA

Photographer: SASHA JAIRAM
Creative Director : KAPIL BATUS
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Clothes : ZEGNA FW2023

AP DHILLON isn't here yet, and yet he has arrived. It's the afternoon after the premiere party for *AP Dhillon: First of a Kind*—which lasted late into the previous night—and a day before the documentary arrives on Prime Video. He has a busy day ahead of him, busier than most of us, doing something he has been avoiding so far: Meeting the press. Doing his first *Rolling Stone* cover shoot. And he's running almost two hours behind schedule.

Not that it matters to those who wait. Someone plays "With You" for the third time in a row off a loudspeaker. The room can't help but move to the infectious hook of Dhillon's new track. Meanwhile, social media and websites are tripping on the AP Dhillon news cycle—his arrival in India, that music video, rumours of the budding romance, the impromptu gig in Delhi, the crowd-surfing moment at a college in Mumbai.

Barely three years after his career took off into outer space, AP Dhillon has transformed into the kind of rarefied artist-celebrity that occupies rooms—attention spans, conversations, the very ether—before he even enters them. And when he isn't, he's busy hogging the charts. As I write this, "With You" is second the most-streamed track in India on Apple Music and #3 on Spotify, just behind Jasleen Royal's "Heeriye" (with Arijit Singh and Dulquer Salmaan).

No less than three of AP Dhillon's songs are among Spotify's Top 50 – India daily list. It isn't even a new thing. Last year, Dhillon was the only living hip hop artist on Spotify Wrapped 2022's most streamed artists, a list that has been dominated by film music greats like AR Rahman, Arijit Singh, Pritam, Anirudh Ravichander and Shreya Ghoshal. (The only other hip-hop artist was the late Sidhu Moose Wala.)

One album, three EPs, several singles, over a billion streams and millions of followers on social media—Dhillon is arguably the first bonafide global Indian star of the streaming era. Much like wunderkinder Lil Nas X, The Kid LAROI and Hasan Raheem, Dhillon's spectacular rise to fame is a case study in the radical possibilities that streaming has created for artists to be discovered around the world.

But, Dhillon's also an exception. He wasn't snatched up by a major label. He didn't immediately go on radio shows and podcasts to talk about himself. He didn't sign up for major platforms like Coke Studio to bask in some of that shared limelight. He chose instead to keep making music, back it up with excellent visuals, go on the road, and let the art speak for itself.

It's no small feat for an independent artist, resisting the call of Bollywood and demands of self-promotion, sitting on the other side of the world, to sustain this level of interest and momentum. Indeed, part of the hype stems from the mystique he has worn like a shroud. Who is this self-styled superstar, with his preternatural talent and audacious sense of style, who coolly arrived on our radar in the autumn of 2020, and refuses to leave?

When he does step into this room—the garden-facing tea lounge at the Taj Land's End in suburban Mumbai—Dhillon is by far the tallest guy. His undercut and beard are freshly trimmed. He looms over the rest of us in a sharp black suit. He smiles often, and speaks in a surprisingly low, deep voice. A two-person security detail accompanies him, glaring at those of us who try to get too close.

The music is quickly switched from his discography to a trap-heavy playlist. The voices and words of Don Toliver, Central Cee, Gunna fill the room. Everyone is removed from his line of sight. Dhillon springs into action: He poses like a pro, switches looks, favorites some shots, confers with his crew, takes some business decisions, takes selfies for fans, and dishes on his life and career—all within an hour, without breaking a sweat.

"I'm just putting myself out there," Dhillon says with a small laugh, slouched in a chair post-shoot, when I ask him about this phase of his life. "This is the time for fans—the whole world—to get to know me. And not just me, but the whole team." The documentary is a first step in that direction. Even though it focuses on Dhillon's artistry and struggle to reach this point, it is no vanity project, he assures me.

It isn't the candid tell-all that his fans have been yearning for, either. "I didn't have that blueprint to follow because it was such a first of a kind audience. It's informative and it's meant to be helpful to young artists—be they in film or music or anything else." And so that's the intention: to present a nuts-and-bolts look at the business of music, from the perspective of a staunchly independent musician and his crew (and second family) at Run Up Records, who are in total command of their craft, sound and narrative. "It's good to inspire people," he nods.

Dhillon's story begins in 1993, in Gurdaspur, a town in Punjab that is a two-hour drive from the India-Pakistan border. Amrit Pal was a middle-class boy whose family had seen more than their fair share of difficulties, though he still refuses to go into details about that. He liked sports. He didn't like school. He liked hanging out with his friends. Just another regular teenager.

"I was fond of music, but it wasn't like I wanted to become an artist." They were not a musically-inclined family, he says, although he did absorb Golden-era Bollywood and Punjabi hits off the radio and TV. Music wasn't a real possibility anyway. "I wanted to learn how to play the guitar, but my Dad was like nah, focus on school," he laughs.

"I WAS FOND OF MUSIC, BUT IT WASN'T LIKE I WANTED TO BECOME AN ARTIST. I WANTED TO LEARN HOW TO PLAY THE GUITAR, BUT MY DAD WAS LIKE FOCUS ON SCHOOL."

After graduating from engineering college in Punjab, he headed West, to Canada, to pursue a degree in business in 2015. A recent Instagram post shows him sitting on a staircase the night before he left the country. In the video, a younger, more carefree Dhillon, a full mop of hair on his head and an acoustic guitar in his hand, sings a mellifluous Punjabi number.

In the caption, Dhillon talks about the struggles of the immigrant life, including money problems and language barriers. He only ever hints at his own experiences with these things—such as a fragment of a memory about spending a night on the street with his suitcases—without ever going into specifics. "We are all trying to find our way in a world that we don't understand and that doesn't understand us."

Dhillon's own way to navigate this "treacherous, toxic world" has been to create music. "When I started out, I started from ground zero," he says. He built a studio the size of a small dining table in a garage in Vancouver, engineering the insulation, sound, acoustics by himself. He taught himself how to write, arrange, record, mix and master music. "That was all something you learn from not having money and having to figure it out on your own. It's the hustle, right?"

Along the road he found Shinda Kahlon, Gurinder Gill and Gminxr, equally talented artists, kindred spirits and loyal stage mates. They wrote, produced and sang for each other. When labels this and that side of the world told them their music was not cutting it, they launched their own. At the heart of their project was a unique sound. "I spent over a year just in the studio, frustrated, just trying to put together the sound," he shakes his head. "It doesn't come overnight."

That sound—a potent, all-encompassing, ever-evolving mix of Punjabi folk, hip-hop, trap and R&B, powered by the rhymes, rhythms and voices of all three artists—is one major reason for Dhillon's peerless success. "AP Dhillon feels at once folky in the Punjabi context and the North American context," observes Himanshu Suri aka Heems, the Queens-origin rapper of Punjabi descent, ex-Das Racist MC who has also worked in A&R at Spotify.

In mainstream Indian hip-hop, Punjabi rap, with its two-decade long arc, is the oldest offshoot. In 2002, Bohemia dropped his seminal album, *Vich Pardesan De*. It quickly ascended to the top of the BBC Radio UK Charts, and Bohemia had drawn a straight line from Compton to Chandigarh. Since then, Punjabi hip-hop has thrown up stars like Yo Yo Honey Singh to Mika to Raftaar to Badshah—and a template for the next big club banger, that involved rhymes about girls, drugs, cars, beefs, the high life.

As hip-hop has spread across India in the last decade, it has evolved into an exercise in radical thought, where authenticity and truth-speaking have come to hold greater value than stunting (well, to a degree). DIVINE, Prabh Deep and MC Stan's street-speak is about the hard knocks of life,

"THIS IS THE TIME FOR FANS—THE WHOLE WORLD—TO GET TO KNOW ME. AND NOT JUST ME, BUT THE WHOLE TEAM."

and how dreaming big can be an act of defiance. They flex, but they also introspect.

The early tracks and music videos that Dhillon put out in late 2019 to early 2020 were windows into the very masculine worlds of these Punjabi boys. "Fake," one of the very first, was a dark track about heartbreak—desi in spirit and drill in essence. "Majhail" was an ode to the warriors of Majha, the region of Punjab that Dhillon hails from, with lyrics laid over the beat from Ashanti and Fat Joe's 2002 hit "What's Luv." "Deadly," the only one of Dhillon's music videos to feature guns, spoke of exercising caution and living one's life despite being surrounded by violence.

The world was writhing in the throes of the pandemic when "Brown Munde" arrived in September 2020—an anthem for South Asian solidarity that echoed over headphones around the globe, uniting us in some kind of borderless silent rave. The video for "Brown Munde" featured NAV, Steel Banglez and Sidhu Moose Wala, three of the biggest names in the desi rap movement gaining momentum then. It was the first of Dhillon's music to resonate with a non-Punjabi-speaking audience. It made him a star overnight.

"Brown Munde" was proof that where Indian hip-hop had been trying to find common ground between the East and West, reality and aspiration; Dhillon had vaulted over the very notion of latitudes and tapped into some invisible frequency. What's been consistent since is clean rhymes, a focus on melody, and little to no aggression. It's why Dhillon's music has resonated with millennials and Gen Z from Vancouver to Varanasi; but is also ever-present in the wedding DJ's playlist. It sounds familiar, yet new, to everyone. And it sounds like music.

"Dhillon's ear for production is also adventurous," observes Heems. "Besides exploring hip-hop beats familiar to listeners around the world, he doesn't shy away from other influences outside India, from guitar-centric disco to electronic. He thinks about every aspect of his music, excelling from his voice, to lyrics, to the musicality of his production."

"With You" showcases Dhillon's versatility; and its music video, co-starring the actor Banita Sandhu, demonstrates of his insatiable desire to create. Gone, for now, are the earthy vocals, the micro crests and troughs of his voice, in favor of a more smudged, softer flutter. Ever gentler melodies and beats, real women (not just dreamgirls), less flashy cars and castles in the background—Dhillon has, in the last year, cultivated a pop orientation and softboi aesthetic that's only further expanded his fandom.

"WHEN I STARTED OUT, I STARTED FROM GROUND ZERO."

What new shapes can we expect this sound to shift into? "I just released 'Sleepless,' which is early style house music," says Dhillon, adding that he doesn't know what the next inspiration is going to be. "That's also part of the whole idea of putting ourselves out of the box, trying to do something different."

"I'm also thinking of putting out an EP with this documentary series which I still need to finish." That three-track EP, named after the documentary, arrived weeks after this conversation. Alongside "With You," there's also "Scars" and "Lifestyle," written by Kahlon—with that patent mash of hip-hop, pop and dance sounds, the perfect soundtrack for that late night *gedi*.

Experiments lie elsewhere. Dhillon says he has some deep house tracks recorded and ready but after a pause he adds: "I don't think it's the right time to put it out there yet. It might be too much for the audience." Too much? "I feel like we started with a hip-hop track and that fanbase wants hip-hop," Dhillon explains. "Then we put out pop, and now that fanbase wants pop. It's hard to keep everyone happy. But as an artist you get bored of doing the same music. I mean, you can—if you're just looking for the same hits, the streaming, the numbers, but I feel like you don't really evolve. And for me, it's about doing more with different styles of music."

Fan expectations are one thing; the industry's another. "When I worked at Spotify," says Heems, "I was tasked with bringing Indian music to global audiences, learning from the Latin team there. I worked alongside African and Arab editors who had the same objective, bringing local genres not just to the diaspora but to Western audiences as well."

"We now see success in artists like Bad Bunny and Burna Boy, showing it takes one big artist to really open the floodgates," Heems observes. "At one point that artist seemed to be Sidhu Moose Wala, but since his death, it seems AP Dhillon is poised to be that artist for Punjabi music and Indian music as a whole."

Dhillon appears to be aware of this, but claims that his focus is just to stay true to his craft. To be human, to keep making music. But he does have lofty visions for the label. "I feel like I want to start bringing other artists into Run Up," he muses. "Probably put a team out here to find talent and nurture it. I feel like we're a billion people, there's got to be a lot of talent out here—and in Canada and in the States."

"Because at first, none of those west side labels wanted to come work, and then we woke this sleeping giant," he smiles. "Now they're all here, but they don't understand the culture. They're just here to find the next hit and make the money. For us, it's about finding the next AP, the next Shinda, the next Gurinder and helping them in the right way," Dhillon says, a glint in his eye. "You know, instead of sucking their blood." ®

Rap's Next 50 Years

These are the artists who will help define hip-hop's next half-century

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MARRS

IN 50 YEARS, hip-hop has transformed and taken on any number of different shapes and contexts while remaining undeniably distinct. You don't quite know why something is hip-hop, but it strikes you as immediately as any physical quality. The rap world has invented new forms of expression capable of adapting to the changes brought on by the expansion of technology like the internet, all while remaining true to its essence, the indomitable spirit at the heart of this culture. More than just artists, today's rap world is a constellation of figures all interlinked by the lineage they share with hip-hop's forebears. Whether they're rappers, producers, fashion designers, or online creators, hip-hop is as stuffed with talent as ever. Hip-hop changes too fast to predict far into the future, but here are 20 figures who are changing the game — and will help shape rap's next 50 years. (You can see the full list, featuring an additional 30 picks, on our website.) JEFF IHAZA

Baby Tron

"I DON'T KNOW what it is, but I feel like we got the sound that everybody wants right now. Not necessarily me, or somebody in particular, but just the state of Michigan as a whole," BabyTron told *Rolling Stone* in 2021. Over the years, he's become the Pied Piper of Michigan rap — the regional style of intense punchlines and goofy music videos. The internet adores his elastic flow and penchant for lyrical agility; real heads connect with Tron's ability to rap about whatever is in his head — the NBA, video games, weed — and still be humorous while doing so. If Babyface Ray and Veeze are the critically acclaimed rappers from Detroit, the ones who craft albums crisply and efficiently, then Tron is the city's king of the internet. (Though he'd probably prefer a basketball metaphor.)

Tron is known to treat his raps something like a sport, opting to rhyme over complex, often multipart beats. On one end, you could say he's pushing boundaries in the genre, except it's hard to imagine anyone else rapping on the type of production he chooses. "You could have a person who only raps on some evil beats from Detroit. And then you got me, who does the funky techno stuff," he said. "It's just different bags out here." This spring, he dropped "100 Bars," a gauntlet of lyrical agility in which he rapped his way to the number 100.

Despite the viral antics, Baby-Tron takes rap as seriously as it can be taken. "I'm doing it every day. So it is definitely like the gym. Basketball, mic, booth. Same thing," he said. "I keep trying to make my punchlines more and more crazy, [add] more bits and pieces. Maybe it's four things that all go together in one line. That's all I be trying to do." YouTube is where he is most effective, as he continues churning out songs that function as loosies, or albums that are sequenced like more mercurial mixtapes from the blog-rap era. Tron has also recently started to lean into his natural goofiness. When he is focused, he's someone who not only is good at rapping, but also sounds like he flat-out loves to rap. JAYSON BUFORD

PHOTOGRAPH BY
NATHAN BAJAR

KEY GLOCK

THE 2021 MURDER of Young Dolph was grotesquely heartbreaking, but ask Key Glock and he will tell you that you have to stay strong for the family. The Memphis rap revival has been partly led by Key Glock, a cousin of Dolph. Glock's a traditional Memphis rapper with a slur to match and a pugnacious tone that adds to his arsenal as a rapper. See the earthy "Dirt," off of *Glockoma 2,* where the number-one rule is to get the money — a rule that Dolph taught him. Glock is a rapper meant for the strip clubs and the speakers booming from trunks, especially if you are on Elvis Presley Boulevard. If Dolph was the boss, then Glock was his lieutenant. Since Dolph's murder, Glock has been tasked with being the leader of Dolph's Paper Route Empire label. The ghost of Dolph hovers all over Glock's music. He's the next one in Memphis, even though that goes deeper than the chains and money. It's in his legacy. Glock's latest record, *Glockoma 2,* his first since his cousin was murdered, is a testament to rap's raw emotive spirit. "I just sat still. I didn't force or rush it; I had to deal with time," he told *Rolling Stone* of his process on the album. "I wasn't feeling it. It wasn't in me to record. I was grieving, bro. Ain't no way around it.... Everybody has a date. You can't run from it, no matter what it is.... When it is your time, it is your time. You got to wake up, live your best life, and be prepared." J.B.

DD Osama

THERE IS AN uneasy pendulum of emotions when it comes to the violence in the communities where hip-hop flourishes, especially in the internet era. Though violence and its wretched association with Black youth has always been a discussion in the genre — the Nineties saw the rise of gangsta rap, and the deaths of Biggie and Tupac; the aughts brought concerns of music glamorizing the drug trade — today's young people, faced with the same circumstances endemic to America's underserved communities, have grown uniquely warped by the hyperspeed contours of social media. Perhaps no other rapper personifies that quite like Harlem drill star DD Osama. The 16-year-old has star power as long as the island of Manhattan. He rose to prominence alongside his brother Notti Osama, who was tragically killed in an altercation with a rival crew last year. This being the era of TikTok, Notti's death was immortalized in a viral dance originated by the group responsible for his death, spawning a craze that spanned far beyond New York. If the origin story seems dramatic, it's because it is. DD quickly became the frontman for the drill boom in New York, as his releases ooze the raw trauma of losing his cousin at such a young age. In some ways, DD is a symbol of the kind of fame characteristic of his generation. He was thrust into stardom by way of personal grief, a familiar condition in 2023.

At 16, there's clear development to be had, but Osama's ability to wrangle pain and virality with an undeniable bravado is a sign of the resilience of talent in the current generation. Throughout his releases, you get a sense that Osama would have found fame regardless; "Who I Am" has glimmers of a crossover hit, and "Let's Do It" has a chaotic swagger reminiscent of the old Chief Keef videos. His debut mixtape, *Here 2 Stay,* from earlier this year, is equal parts vulnerable and pugnacious, as the young MC finds his footing in the rap world while grieving the tragic loss of his cousin. For his part, Osama is comfortable in the limelight, already a magnet for collaborations among other rappers in his cohort, like NLE Choppa, who appears on "Let's Do It," as well as the 17-year-old phenom Luh Tyler, who Osama recently teased a collaboration with.

Questions still linger about how prevalent a role gang violence plays in Osama's and other prominent drill artists' music. But Osama is unquestionably gifted in a world that increasingly seems built for maximum reaction. If anyone's going to be capable of navigating such an environment, it's him. Osama either inspires or revolts; either way, you wouldn't want to miss out on what he does next. J.B.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY IMAGES; EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES; PRINCE WILLIAMS/WIREIMAGE; SIMONE JOYNER/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON TODD/"BILLBOARD"/GETTY IMAGES; CARY FAGAN. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: BRYAN GARVEY; SCRILL DAVIS

Lola Brooke

2021'S "DON'T PLAY WITH It," by Brooklyn-bred rapper Lola Brooke, bursts with an easy bravado inherent to the young star's hometown. Nevertheless, the track garnered a delayed reaction, only becoming an inescapable hit, first on TikTok, earlier this year. The same could be said for Brooke, who spent close to a decade putting in the work in the same Brooklyn rap community that birthed greats like Pop Smoke. But hard work isn't a problem for the 29-year-old MC, who, since achieving viral success, immediately hit the pavement with a bevy of formidable features — like on Flo Milli's "Conceited" and a legendary linkup with Ciara on "Da Girls," both tracks from earlier this year that show off Brooke's guttural, syrup-thick delivery. She performed at this year's Summer Jam, a set complete with choreography she learned with the help of Teyana Taylor. After all, rap is nothing if not collaborative, and Brooke belongs to a rising generation of rappers who understand what it means to be talented and humble.

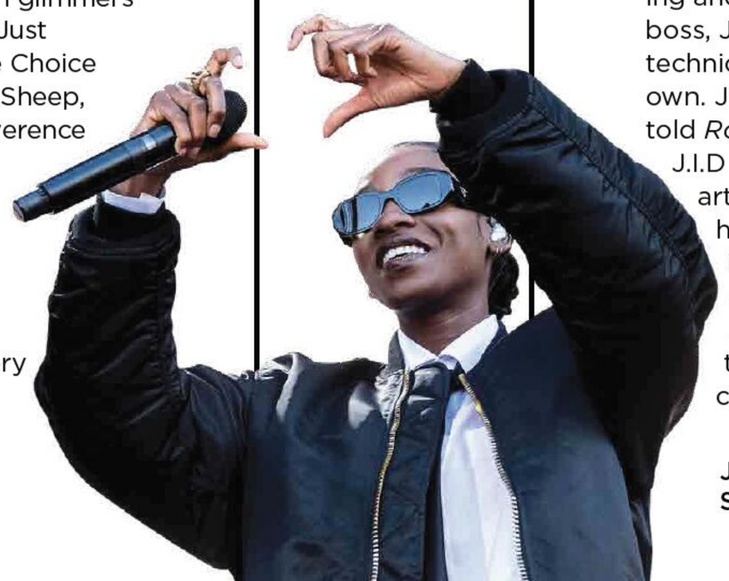
In the span of one year, Brooke went from citing Meek Mill as a major influence on her music to having Mill tease a collaboration between the two. Despite the long gestation period for the success of "Don't Play With It," Brooke was diligent in its promotion, releasing a string of remixes that capitalized on the song's internet explosion. Her upcoming full-length is one of the year's most hotly anticipated new releases, and she has already shown glimmers of a groundswell of skill on April's "Just Relax," which flips a sample of "The Choice Is Yours," by New York's own Black Sheep, with a kind of localized flair and reverence that sets the song apart from her contemporaries' endeavors in classic hip-hop references. It's why Brooke is almost certain to make the kind of impact on her borough that the late Pop Smoke made. There's simply not an ounce of fakery in her grind. JEFF IHAZA

LITTLE SIMZ

AS MUCH of the domestic buzz on U.K. rap has focused on the drill scene, Little Simz has been steadily building a stellar catalog. The Islington, London-born rapper has become renowned for albums meshing elements of grime, R&B, electronic music, and whatever other genre she and frequent collaborator Inflo deem a fitting soundscape for her diaristic, probing lyricism. Simz dropped *Stratosphere,* her first mixtape, in 2010. Her album *Grey Area* was a finalist for the 2019 Mercury Prize. In 2022, she broke through and won the honor with *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert,* her fourth studio album, with gems just as capable of radiating effortless cool and charisma as she is of existential urgency. ANDRE GEE

J.I.D

DREAMVILLE rapper J.I.D has had a cult following since his 2017 debut album, *The Never Story,* which drew on his autobiographical insights from growing up in East Atlanta, his ear for rhythm, his sandpaper singing voice, and his knack for lyrical precision — all attributes that have only grown more potent since. His storytelling reached impressive heights on last year's *The Forever Story,* which brought J.I.D's lore full circle with recollections of fighting and family — and at its most compelling, the literal intersection of the two on "Crack Sandwich." He has classic panache and a modern touch, somehow reminiscent of early Eminem, Q-Tip, and Big L all at once. And sure, he has the blessing and mentorship of his label boss, J. Cole, but he has a texture, technicality, and acumen all his own. J.I.D's manager, Barry Hefner, told *Rolling Stone* last year, "I think J.I.D just wants to deliver great art to the world. I don't think he really understood what it took to be at the highest of levels. As he grows, he's starting to realize some of this shit [he] just doesn't care for." MANKAPRR CONTEH



J.I.D PHOTOGRAPH BY SALIHAH SAADIQ BARNETT

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: FELICIA ABBAN; HELLE ARENSBAK/RITZAU SCANPIX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; TIMELESS

Bktherula

WHEN YOU THINK of what it feels like to be young in the 2020s, it's hard not to conjure an image of a scene from a Bktherula video. Girls doing kick flips, fluorescent hair colors, impeccably baggy jeans. All set to spaced-out synths perfect for tripping mushrooms in a field. In other words, Bktherula feels "right now" because she is. She first rose to prominence with the 2020 single "Tweakin' Together," which had the ethereal, in-the-cosmos sound of internet-born subgenres like cloud rap, except with a trap-inspired cadence delivered with the confidence of a hip-hop prodigy. The song's chorus ("And I know these niggas mad as fuck/Bitch I'm in the trap, with TM we throw it up") landed on SoundCloud like a missile, racking up more than 100,000 plays in its first month. Bktherula says "Tweakin' Together" is "a love song," which fits the track's playfully sentimental ethos, "That nigga just like me, I ain't know I had a tether," she sings. The song, produced by Mars Beats, started as an instrumental titled "Nine9 x Duwap Kaine Type Beat 2019 — 'Questions,'" which speaks to the track's roots in the online underground.

Born Brooklyn Candida Rodriguez in Atlanta, 21-year-old Bktherula personifies a generation of musicians who can tap into varied sounds and disciplines with ease. This year, she dropped her mixtape, *LVL5 P1,* which sounds like a distillation of the genre-flipping spirit you'd expect from an internet native. While rappers like Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert deserve credit for bringing the melodic flourishes of rock and hardcore to the realm of hip-hop, Bktherula seems to embody the genres inherently. "We Made It," featuring fellow rap-rocker Rico Nasty, rides glittering synths that build into an explosion of bass and chaos that sounds like a genre unto itself, a fusion of the freewheeling mosh pit and the smooth groove of an R&B hit. She followed up *LVL5 P1* with a record of acoustic takes on several of her hits, *Love Nirvana (Acoustic),* which offers more proof of Bktherula's versatility. Those renditions are constructed with a ground-level understanding of the sound of hip-hop, as opposed to landing like the often-clunky YouTube-creator remixes of popular rap songs. Fitting, given how much of a bona fide rock star she is. J.I.

Central Cee

U.K. RAP PHENOM Central Cee has certainly kept busy over the past few years. He dropped his second mixtape, *23,* last February, which debuted at the top of the U.K. charts, and he's quickly becoming the face of London's resilient drill scene as the Chicago-born sound makes its way around the rap diaspora. Born Oakley Neil H.T Caesar-Su, Central Cee grew up in the West London neighborhood of Shepherd's Bush, an area that's integral to the current wave of U.K. drill, a scene that has been on the rise since the 2010s. It's also a region with one of the highest rates of violent crime in the city. Cee's raps have a calm and collected cool about them, but underneath, you get the sense there's a more deeply rooted feeling. Since dropping *23,* he's gone on to release the mega-viral hit "Doja," capitalizing on the hook-driven machinations of TikTok's For You page. The song got so popular, with its infectious hook, that eventually Doja Cat herself caught wind, popping up in Central Cee's comment sections joking about a reference to her on the track.

That's not the only high-profile connection the now-25-year-old MC has garnered recently. After linking up with fellow U.K. rap heavyweight Dave for the joint EP *Split Decision,* featuring the crossover hit single "Sprinter," Central Cee connected with noted U.K.-rap fan Drake for a universally acclaimed On the Radar Freestyle. It was his first stop on the road to eventually becoming a household name in the States. It doesn't hurt that his On the Radar appearance with Drizzy found both rappers firmly in their comfort zones, delivering some of the best verses in the segment's storied history. Cench, as Central Cee is colloquially known, did more than just keep his own alongside a veteran; the freestyle could easily make for a hit single on a project from either rapper. It's been a long time coming, but rappers from across the pond are finally becoming a major part of the hip-hop tapestry, and Central Cee is sure to go down as one of the most essential crossovers. "The music is just how I feel. It's just like a page in my diary," he told *Rolling Stone* last year. J.I.

CENTRAL CEE PHOTOGRAPH BY GRIFFIN LOTZ

LATTO

IN 2020, WHEN LATTO titled her debut album — and herself — *Queen of Da Souf,* it seemed more like a hopeful manifesto than a reality. She was 21, had been grinding since she was a 16-year-old contestant on a rap show helmed by Jermaine Dupri, and had barely cracked the Hot 100. And yet, Latto has rapidly made good on that title in the three years since, becoming a rising superstar thanks to a combination of diligence, development, and strategy. "A lot of people just do this for a check: Make a catchy song, and go viral," she told *Rolling Stone* as her breakthrough single, "Big Energy," climbed up the charts last year. "But I was at the end of the real cypher come-up, the groundwork, passing-out-CDs thing."

Even now, as a budding titan, that selling-CDs-out-the-trunk fervor persists in her. It's what makes her sophomore record, last year's *777,* feel so urgent. (It was the first album she put out as "Latto," having originally gone by "Miss Mulatto" as a kid, then simply "Mulatto," aiming to flip the script on the identity struggles that she faced growing up with a white mother and Black father south of Atlanta.) Everything she's put out since has been even better. You can hear how much sharper her already-potent raps are from single to single, album to album, feature to feature, holding her own beside Cardi B, Trina, Gucci Mane, Mariah Carey, Lil Baby, and Megan Thee Stallion. She's carved out a home for herself on the charts ("Seven," her hit with Jungkook of BTS went to Number One this summer), charged up Coachella, scored major-brand deals, and has been nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy. The rap game is certainly starting to look like her kingdom. M.C.

MAVI

MAVI PONDERS the permutations of existence like a great philosopher — except Aristotle probably didn't have the same knack for melodizing his observations. The Charlotte, North Carolina-raised Mavi pursued both a rap career and a neuroscience degree at Howard University before releasing his brilliant breakout, *Let the Sun Talk,* in 2019. On last year's *Laughing so Hard, it Hurts*, he combed through the grief that engulfed him over the pandemic. "I lost some fear along the way of what it would mean for me to say truly how I feel," he told *Rolling Stone* last year. The world's better for his courage. A.G.

NONAME

HIP-HOP IS at its core protest music, born from the experiences of Black folks on the margins. While the genre's become a cultural and commercial juggernaut, artists like Chicago-raised Noname maintain an ethos that's adversarial to assimilation. Her catalog is a testament to rap as a tool for revolution, full of big ideas delivered in an elegantly elastic flow. And she matches her ethos with action. "I don't do brand deals, I don't take advances," she told RS in 2021. "I don't like doing things I know are going to build on my celebrity because that's not ethical when I'm trying to be anti-capitalist." J.I.

THIS SPREAD, FROM TOP: JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: EDWIG HENSON; MICHAEL AGHARESE; RUEGUH.

LATTO PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HART JR.

Ice Spice

WE LIVE IN an increasingly ephemeral world, where it's easy to chalk up viral success to the fleeting nature of social media feeds. And yet, Ice Spice endures. A year after her viral hit "Munch" took over the globe, the Bronx native has managed to keep the world's attention. Her debut EP, *Like...?,* offered a framework for a different kind of rap star, one steeped in the snippet-driven ecosystem most young people engage with online, while retaining the bravado and wit that built New York rap heavyweights like Cam'Ron. Taylor Swift was smart enough to connect with the 23-year-old for a remix of "Karma," and Ice Spice counts Drake as a mentor. Maybe that's why Ice Spice, despite having released only a handful of songs, is such a force in the rap world. Beyond making bops, she's articulating a relationship to fame and social media that is decidedly Gen Z. It's OK if you don't get it, but don't expect her to be going away anytime soon. J.I.

BLAQBONEZ

BLAQBONEZ has been declaring himself the "best rapper in Africa" for nearly as long as he's been rapping publicly. The 27-year-old Nigerian got his start as a teen battle rapper in his native country and went on to release his debut in 2021, *Sex Over Love,* one of the best albums of that year *anywhere*. We're not weighing in on that Best Rapper in Africa title, but Blaqbonez's willingness to declare it, his unflinching drive to live up to it, and the skill of his execution — be it in the blazing in booth or cracking jokes on social media — is why we're not mad at it. M.C.

LUCKI

Chicago rapper Lucki built a steady fan base over the course of a decade, all while avoiding the telltale pitfalls of young artists in the internet era. His searing vulnerability — letting his tangled emotional interior unfurl over moody trap beats — has made him one of rap's foremost storytellers. He counts Drake, Future, and Playboi Carti as supporters, which is all you really need to know about his depth and range. Lucki's 2023 release, *Flawless Like Me*, is a vibrant distillation of his best talents and proof that the 27-year-old MC is only just getting started. J.I.

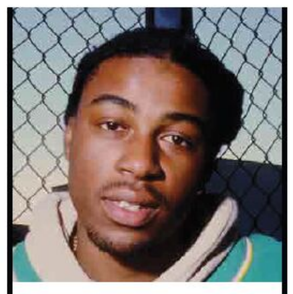
Saucy Santana

HIP-HOP HAS been notoriously heteronormative for decades. As its patriarchal walls crumble a little, Saucy Santana has burst through them with killer attitude, snarky wit, and an insatiable appetite for a good time.

"I see a lot of records that are blowing up now aren't very calculated," he said at a recent Spotify event in his new home of Atlanta. "It's not like 'We have to reach this algorithm.' I see a lot of fun, free music is happening right now, and that's what I've always been doing." His uninhibited personality pops off his tracks, making them go viral, like 2020's "Material Girl" and "Walk." As a gay rapper, he follows in the footsteps of all kinds of hip-hop changemakers, from Big Freedia to his close friends Yung Miami and JT of City Girls, to assert his talent, fashion sense, femininity, and his right to express all three without remorse. "I wanna have my feet in every genre," Santana told *Rolling Stone.* "Two years from now it's giving the face of fashion, it's giving the face of makeup, it's giving Grammys, it's giving movies ... the shit that I can do in two more years, I can't even imagine," Santana says. M.C.

TISAKOREAN

TISAKOREAN STARTED out as a dancer and a DJ, and says he only started making music because he wanted a soundtrack to match his style. His brand of rap, not unlike Lil B or ILoveMakonnen, can best be described as silly, which is the attitude he'd like to engender in his fans. On TikTok, Tisa's dance videos rack up millions of views, thanks to the ways they remind you of how fun hip-hop can be. In 2021, he told *Rolling Stone* about his fondest musical memory, a collapse of generation and genre courtesy of Pharrell Williams and Jay-Z: "When I seen the 'Frontin'' video, I didn't know about Prince, honestly," Tisa explains of the Williams and N.E.R.D. hit. "So when I seen that 'Frontin'' video, I didn't know that song was made *for* Prince." The rap game will always need its lighthearted, playful spirit, and TisaKorean is a perfect example of an artist who taps into that sensibility naturally. J.I.

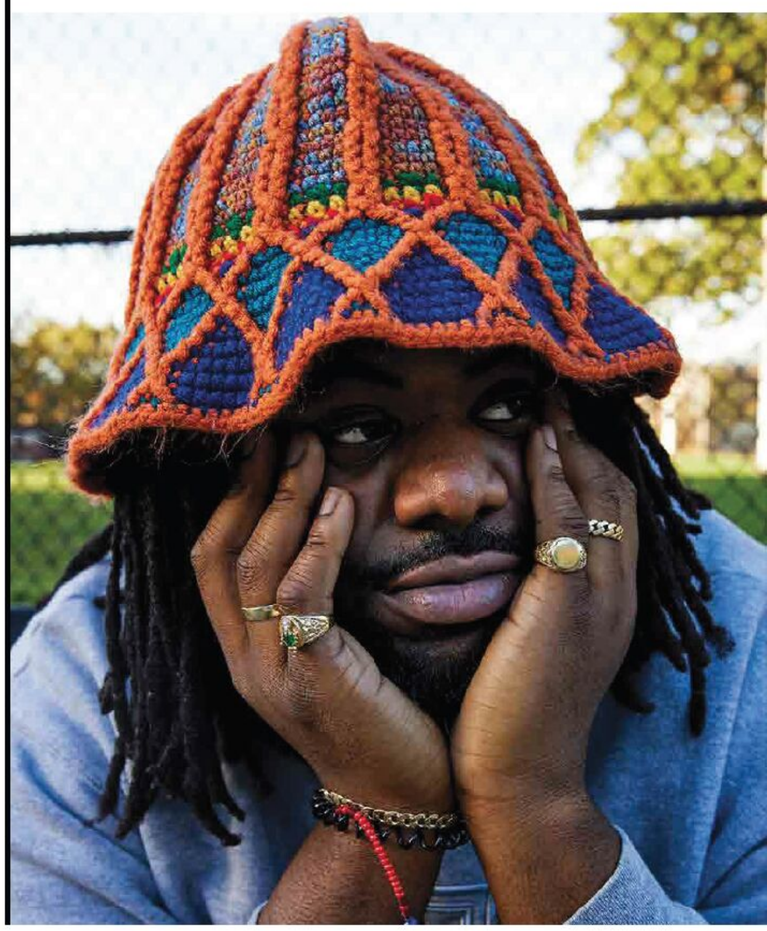


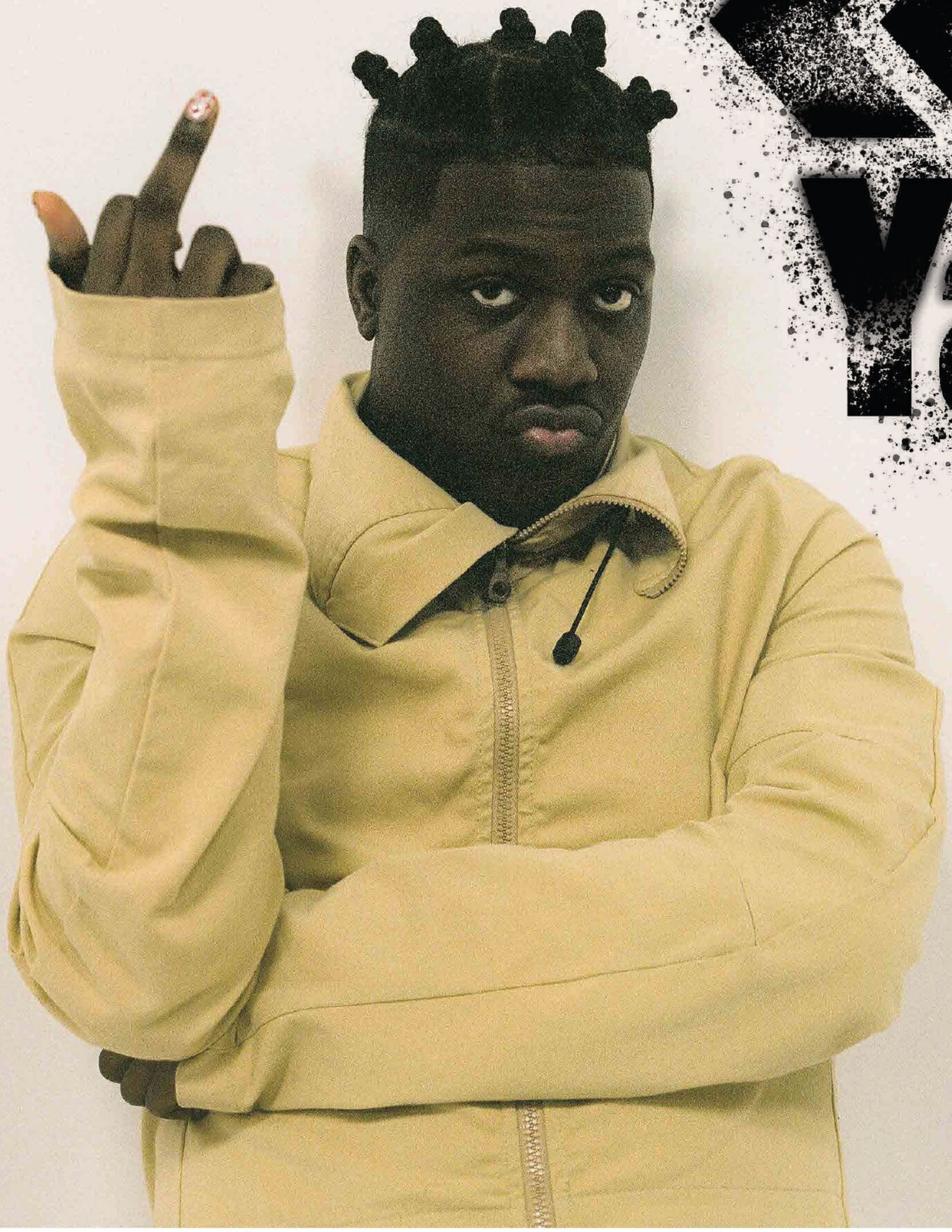
454

THE RAPPER 454 offsets his spaced-out production, replete with shimmering synths and rowdy breakbeats, with a flow that's full of real emotion. His debut, *4 Real,* arrived in March 2021 as a fully realized vision of an artist with a clear point of view. On the standout track "Andretti," he's effortlessly clever, delivering thoughtful bars with philosophical detachment: "Polo from the old age, feds know that it's no case/ We sped like road rage, new puffer for cold days," he raps. Born Willie Wilson in a suburb of Orlando, 454 has garnered a robust fan base, at one point earning a spot on Frank Ocean's Blonded Radio. Earlier this year, he collaborated with in-demand New York producer Evilgiane for *Fast 5,* a stripped-down and emotive take on the textured sounds that have made him one of this generation's brightest stars. J.I.

MIKE

RECENTLY, AT a packed show in Brooklyn's Herbert Von King Park, MIKE, 24, hosted his third-annual Young World Festival, a celebration of the borough's vibrant underground rap movement. The rapper and producer is based out of Brooklyn and has been sharing music on Bandcamp since 2015. He's toured with acts like Freddie Gibbs and Earl Sweatshirt. MIKE's serene raps feel like a live broadcast from his spirit, and he's bubbling into the mainstream with a rising generation of young fans. As a producer, he wrangles samples and textures from disparate corners of music and sensation. On his latest album, *Beware of the Monkey,* he balances emotional resonance with calm, soulful production. MIKE has a penchant for emotive, sparse storytelling. "I always thought about artists who have the ability to create their own world and build that from scratch or from nothing," he told *Rolling Stone* on the eve of last year's Young World Festival. "When I think about basically all the artists that are on the bill, it's people that have created those types of worlds with music and shit, at least to me." MIKE's innate sense of intimacy with his fan base is part of an increasingly potent form of audience building among the current generation of rappers, eschewing the trappings of hyper exposure to creating something closer to community on the ground. Beyond being one of his generation's most exciting voices, MIKE is laying the foundation for the future. J.I.





Lil Yachty

IT'S EASY TO imagine a middle-aged Lil Yachty accepting some kind of lifetime achievement award in the not-so-distant future. The Atlanta-born MC entered the rap game at the ripe age of 18, introducing the then-ascendant genre of "mumble rap" to the mainstream. It didn't come without its fair share of detractors, but over the course of the past decade, Yachty has proven more steadfast in his creative vision than most, releasing an album of psychedelic rock as a follow-up to a formidable mixtape honoring the talents of Detroit's vibrant rap scene.

More than just a diligent MC focused on getting better, Yachty is one of hip-hop's foremost nurturers of talent, known to create opportunities for up-and-comers just getting their start. In many ways, Yachty represents the collaborative spirit of hip-hop in the internet age: endlessly curious and open to trying new things. His efforts haven't always been understood. His announcement that he was more than just a rapper ahead of his recent album *Let's Start Here* was met with criticism from some who saw it as turning his back on the genre. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

"I'm not speaking on all SoundCloud rappers. I'm speaking on me. This is for me, because everybody don't have that work ethic," he told *Rolling Stone* earlier this year. "Everyone ain't going to put the hours in to understand a new genre and how to execute something the right way." J.I.

Baby Tate

BABY TATE'S BREAKTHROUGH single "I Am" gave rise to the pandemic's most viral affirmation. TikToks and Instagram videos featuring the song's opening credo — "I am healthy, I am wealthy, I am rich, I am that bitch" — inundated feeds as global lockdowns inspired everything but positivity. Selfie camera meditations to the track started jumping the world over. Back then, she still went by Yung Baby Tate, a moniker she's since shortened, perhaps inadvertently signaling her music's maturity over the years. She told *Rolling Stone* in 2021 that for her forthcoming projects she was planning on "going way more into an R&B space, which I've been kind of hinting at for a long time. You know, I'm not just a rapper. I'm an artist."

Since then, she's had breakout success with her Warner debut, *Mani/Pedi,* from last year, a rousing statement from an artist entering her element. Born Tate Sequoya Farris in Georgia, Baby Tate was raised by a single mother who was also a musician, and you can hear both her fierce sense of independence and reverence for women in the rap community in her music. J.I.

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES; LAUREN DAVIS; GUNNER STAHL; JOSH BRASTED/FILMMAGIC; NUVANY DAVID; CAMERON MOORE

ROLLING STONE

Reviews

Music

MITSKI'S NEW AMERICAN GOTHIC

One of indie rock's most ambitious songwriters goes deeper than ever

By BRENNA EHRLICH

Mitski

The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We

DEAD OCEANS

"I don't like my mind/I don't like being left alone in a room," Mitski sings on her seventh album, her voice honeyed and rich despite her distress. "Please don't take … this job from me." We could read this as your average American workaholic, consumed by the grind. But it's hard not to hear those words as autobiographical — after all, this is the same woman who decided to quit music, then came back, drawn to it like the tides to the moon. As she told Rolling Stone in 2021: "This is who I am.… I'm going to keep getting hurt, and I'm still going to do it, because this is the only thing I can do.'"

When Mitski broke out in 2016 with her excellent *Puberty 2*, listeners →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nicole Rifkin

→ MITSKI

latched onto her personal yet deeply relatable songwriting, her singularly emotive voice, and her music's raw intensity. Her 2018 *Be the Cowboy* was more polished, but still managed to feel like a gut punch. The synth-heavy *Laurel Hell,* her 2022 return after ostensibly quitting music, grappled with her status as indie royalty.

The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We is another evolution: a mix of quotidian-yet-elliptical lyricism, classic country accompaniment, daring orchestral movements, and the musician's unique brand of storytelling. Mitski channels images of love, nostalgia, and the aftertaste of disappointment into a collection of impressionistic vignettes steeped in rural loneliness, like an arty singer-songwriter update of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.*

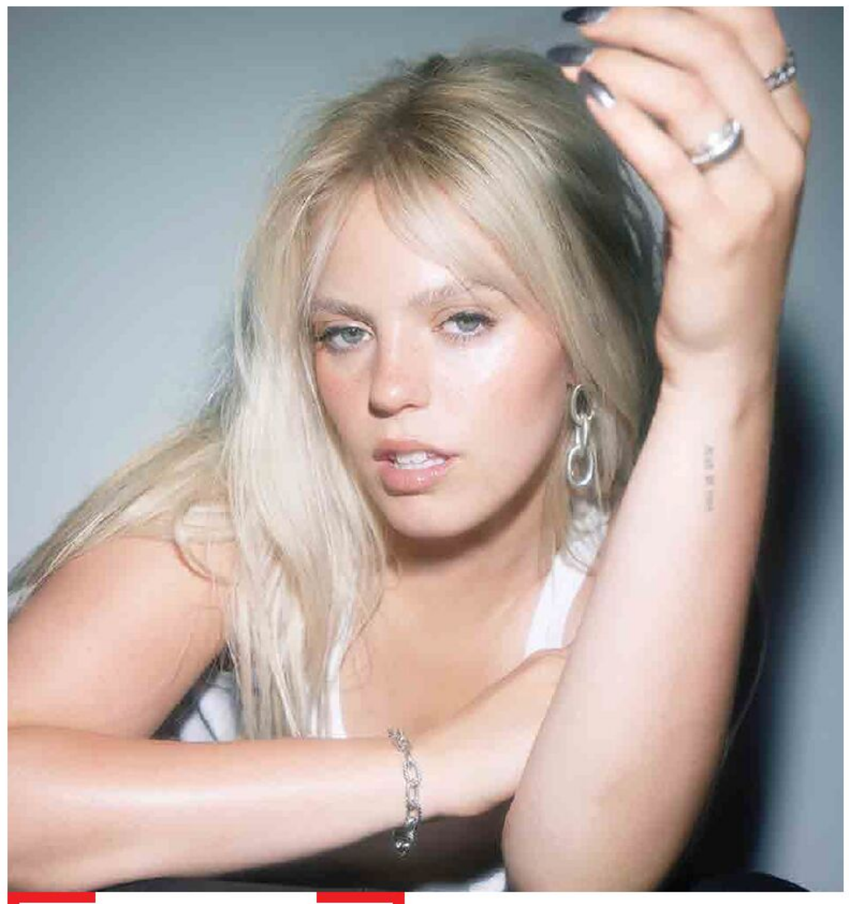
The record begins with quiet acoustic guitar on "Bug Like an Angel," in which the song's narrator eases into a whiskey haze until drinking begins to "feel like family" — the final word punctuated by a choir that sounds like a Greek chorus. "Buffalo Replaced" evokes frontiersmen shooting at animals from freight-train windows; guitars and drums churn like the wheels of a locomotive, and Mitski's voice rises like a train whistle, before ending on an image of small-town desolation. Songs like "Heaven" and "My Love Mine All Mine," are goth-country epics. "The Deal" is just as darkly transcendent, with the song's narrator imagining her soul anthropomorphized as a bird as drums roll like the beating of wings.

Mitski merges her stories with American archetypes. "When Memories Snow" recalls a showdown in a spaghetti Western, but instead of gunslingers, we have a hero battling memories that smother her like snow. "The Frost" seems to be Mitski's answer to Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," while "I'm Your Man" is a murder ballad of sorts, words of devotion morphing into menace.

It isn't all hopeless. The album closes on a character who seems much like Mitski herself, alone in her room on the slinky track "I Love Me After You," which is as cool as the water she drinks in the song after brushing her hair, spritzing toner, and settling back into her skin. "Let the darkness see me," she intones. "I'm king of all the land." Despite the album's title, that land doesn't seem all that inhospitable after all. ®

RENEÉ RAPP BRINGS THE DRAMA

The singer's debut is an emotional roller coaster that feels like streamlined pop By MAURA JOHNSTON



The debut full-length from the *Mean Girls* musical and *The Sex Lives of College Girls* star Reneé Rapp begins with a striking image: "Tasted the blood in my mouth," she coos at the start of its opening track, "Talk Too Much," an extreme close-up of a neurotic mind in what might be love. Spindly guitars and crisp percussion accompany Rapp's worst-case-scenario obsessions before exploding on a sugar-bomb chorus, which encapsulates early-adulthood angst while paying homage to Seventies power pop with some well-placed "*ooh-woo-ooh-woos*"; its breakdown takes the concept literally by allowing Rapp to embark on the sort of circuitous monologue that's every crushed-out person's worst nightmare.

And that's just the first song. *Snow Angel* is a collection of emotional roller coasters in miniature, with the 23-year-old Rapp's versatile voice dipping low and soaring high when the mood demands. The title track chronicles post-breakup depression with knotty metaphors and well-placed pomp-rock fireworks; its quiet-loud-quiet dynamics make it a more abstract take on the neo-power ballad, although "The Wedding Song," which marries a triumphant chorus with a bridge that hints at tumult, is a worthy entrant into that canon. "Willow," meanwhile, is a

Reneé Rapp
Snow Angel
INTERSCOPE

sweet, pillowy ode to a friend going through it, with Rapp shrouding her voice in velvety effects and fluid guitar solos as she tries to prevent her pal's tears — or at least take over weeping duties for a bit.

Rapp's lyrics are cutting when they need to be, too. The simmering synth-pop tune "Pretty Girls" is a standout, with sumptuous sonics and an insistent, immediately catchy chorus that sounds made for soundtracking get-ready-with-me videos, while its verses demystify the world of those rarefied beings. Across *Snow Angel,* Rapp's lyrics are endlessly quotable: "Yes, I am a feminist/But, bitch, you're making it so hard for me/To always be supporting all women," she smirks on "Poison Poison," a breezily infuriated ode to "the worst person on Earth" leavened by some well-placed "*la-la-las*." (It ends with her whisper-singing "Fuck you" in a gleeful way.)

If anything, *Snow Angel* is a sign that big-ticket pop has entered its post-*Sour* phase with gusto. (Alexander 23, who co-produced Olivia Rodrigo's "Good 4 U," produced the bulk of the album.) The emotions are big and the pyrotechnics are shrewdly deployed, and Rapp's searing soprano is up for the task of matching their intensity. It's a formula that allows Rapp to channel her larger-than-life feelings into twisty pop songs that take huge swings while being keenly aware of the person at their core. ®

BREAKING

Bella Dose: Your Next Favorite Girl Group

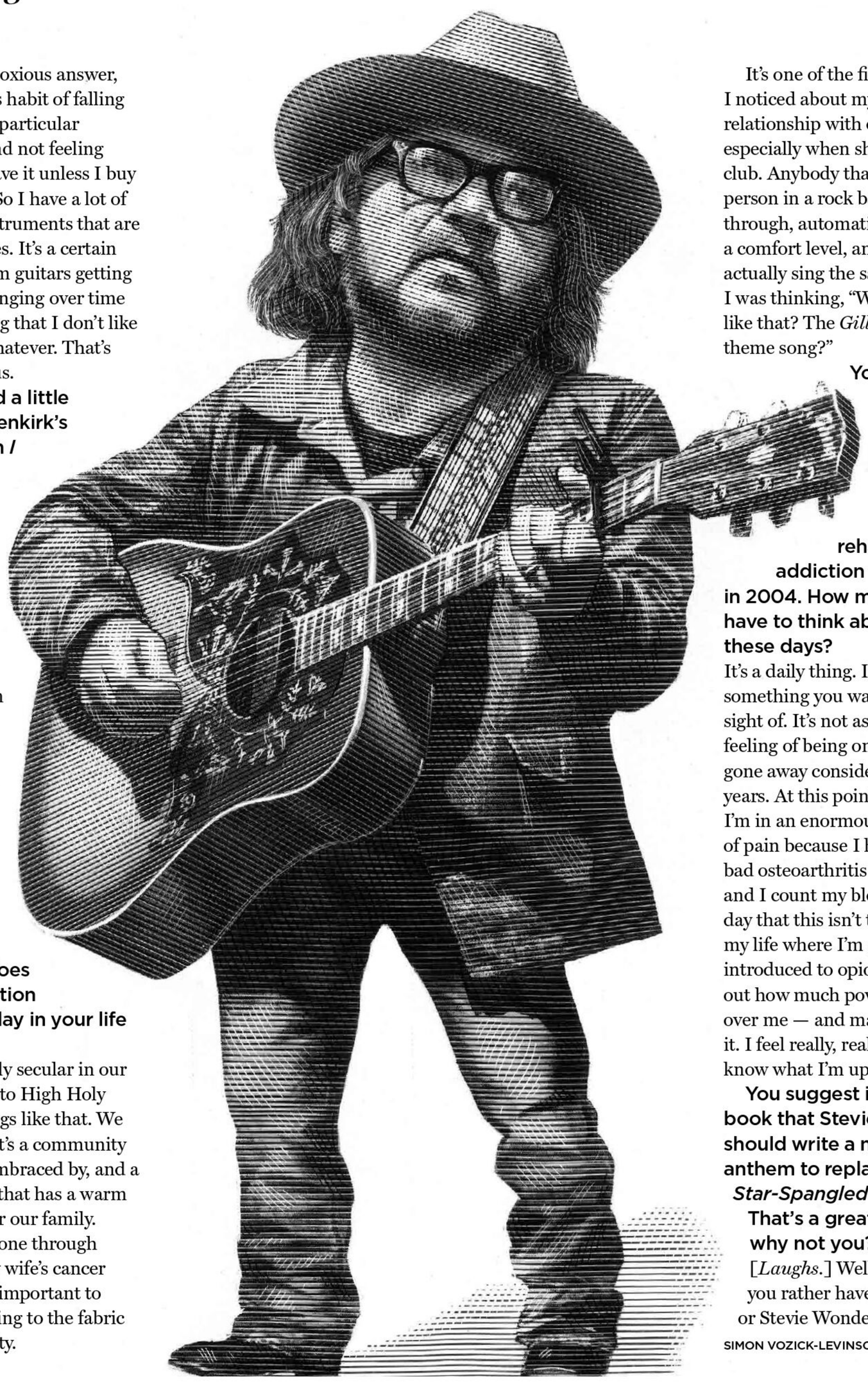
HEARTBREAK doesn't hurt as much when you're with your girls. That's exactly the sisterhood all-Latina group Bella Dose exude on their new album, *L-Pop.* Since releasing their bachata-tinged debut, *Suelta,* in 2021, Bella Dose have elevated their lyricism and expanded their sound. The girls stay true to their roots on the bachata tear-jerker "Adiós," push the needle with the EDM-dembow single "Mírame," and even go down the rock route with "Windows." Their electric chemistry is palpable throughout the LP, and it's that energy that's sure to make them the next girl group to watch. TOMÁS MIER

FROM TOP: KATIA TEMKIN; SHOT BY FEAR

Last Word

Jeff Tweedy

On expensive guitars, listening to new music, Judaism, and staying sober



What is the best piece of advice anyone has given you?

Early on, we were touring with the Band. It was the *Arkansas Traveler* tour with Michelle Shocked and Uncle Tupelo. I was rehearsing, and Rick Danko stepped up onstage behind me, out of the blue, and said, "You sound desperate. You should always sound desperate. Don't lose that." It's a weird way of saying something that I totally agree with. I think what he really meant is people have to hear that you care — that you're desperate to communicate, desperate to connect. That's why we sing.

Wilco's 13th studio album, 'Cousin,' will be released on Sept. 29.

In your new book, *World Within a Song,* you write about all kinds of new music that you love, from Billie Eilish to Rosalía. How have you kept your ears so open to new artists?

Even if it wasn't something I'm naturally curious about, I think it's the most important part of what I do. I want to feed the part of me that gets excited by something unpredictable. I mean, I would've killed for this scenario when I was a kid, that I could just dial up anything I was reading about and hear what it sounded like immediately. So it's a way of honoring that kid in me.

What's the most extravagant purchase you've ever made?

This is an obnoxious answer, but I have this habit of falling in love with a particular instrument and not feeling like I really have it unless I buy another one. So I have a lot of doubles of instruments that are all my favorites. It's a certain insecurity from guitars getting broken or changing over time into something that I don't like as much or whatever. That's pretty frivolous.

You sound a little like Bob Odenkirk's character on *I Think You Should Leave*: "Triples is best."

Exactly. That's me. I think I've got triples of the '68 Gibson Dove.

You were skeptical of religion growing up, but you converted to Judaism as an adult. What role does Jewish tradition and belief play in your life these days?

We're primarily secular in our family. We go to High Holy Days and things like that. We have Seders. It's a community that we feel embraced by, and a congregation that has a warm feeling to it for our family. When we've gone through things like my wife's cancer diagnosis, it's important to mean something to the fabric of a community.

It's one of the first things I noticed about my wife's relationship with other people, especially when she ran a rock club. Anybody that was a Jewish person in a rock band that came through, automatically, they had a comfort level, and they could actually sing the same prayers. I was thinking, "What do I have like that? The *Gilligan's Island* theme song?"

You've been in recovery for almost 20 years, since you went to rehab for an addiction to opioids in 2004. How much do you have to think about that these days?

It's a daily thing. It's not something you want to lose sight of. It's not as intense; the feeling of being on a ledge has gone away considerably over the years. At this point, right now, I'm in an enormous amount of pain because I have really bad osteoarthritis in my hips, and I count my blessings every day that this isn't the period in my life where I'm going to be introduced to opioids and find out how much power they have over me — and maybe not make it. I feel really, really fortunate to know what I'm up against.

You suggest in the book that Stevie Wonder should write a new national anthem to replace *The Star-Spangled Banner.* That's a great idea, but why not you?

[*Laughs.*] Well, who would you rather have write it: Me or Stevie Wonder?

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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